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Keiso

ILLUSTRATION BY

Kureta

The New Demon King War

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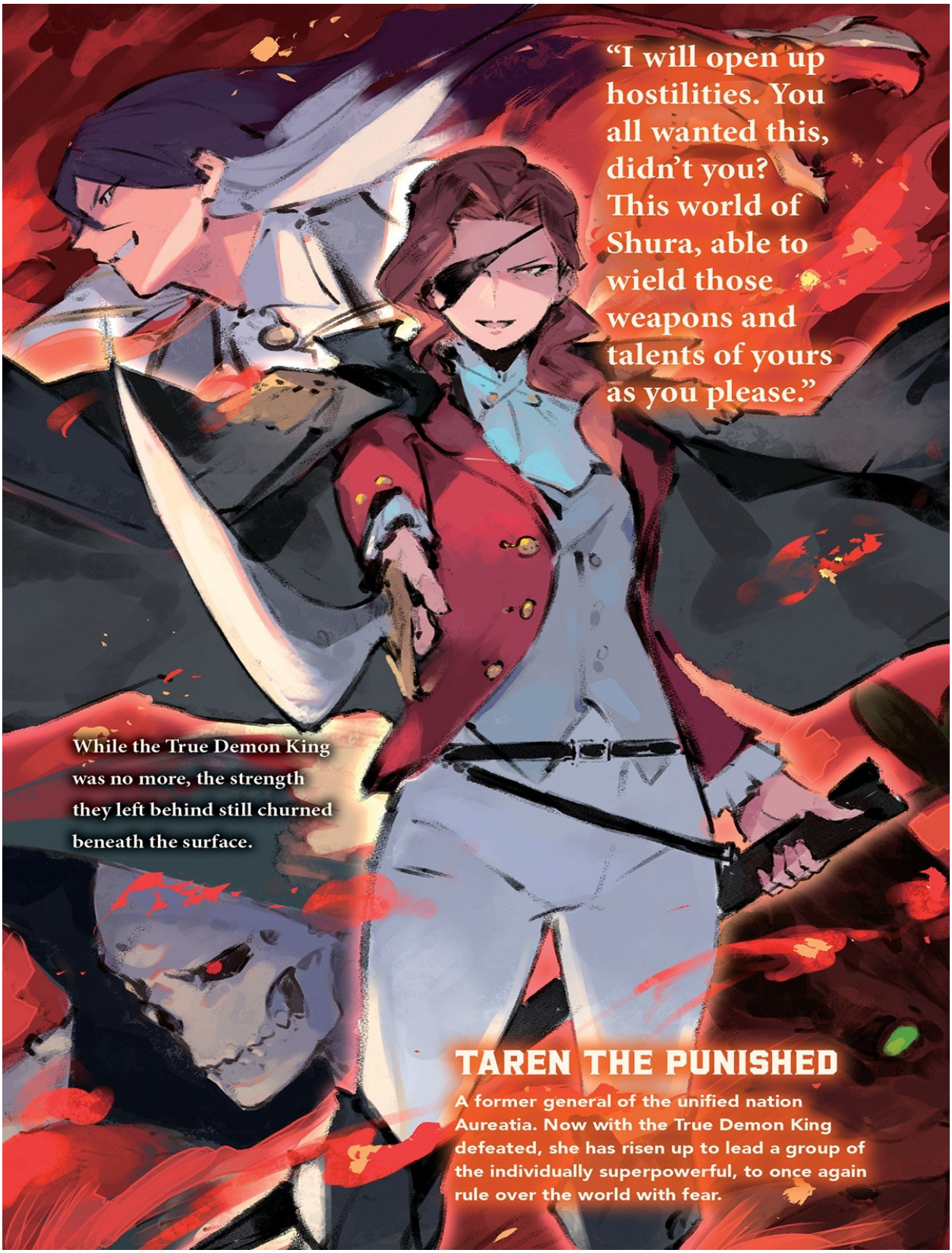
He came from a world other than this one…*the Beyond.*
A rarely seen outsider, introduced to this world from the Beyond, who sometimes brought prosperity and ominous tiding others.
This master swordsman brought with him the most ominous tidings of all.
"Soujirou Yagyuu. You're looking at Earth's last Yagyuu."
CHUN
SOUJIROU
THE WILLOW-SWORD
An all-powerful master swordsman from another world.
In addition to his skill with the blade, he possesses superhuman intuition, granting him the ability to discern, through a single glance, the perfect way to kill any enemy who appears before him.

Hillensingen the Luminous Blade cut down three wyverns all at once and vaporized their bodies.

The whip extended from his hand with blinding speed, striking the wyvern soldiers around him as if it had a will of its own. One of them took such a severe hit that the shock tore him asunder, scattering his viscera.

Alus the Star Runner, alone, was luring in the wyvern force stubbornly flocking around him and cruelly exterminating them.

However, the one leading the wyvern soldiers, Regnejee the Wings of Sunset, looked completely unperturbed, as though he had accounted even for his own comrades' deaths within his battle strategy.


“I will open up hostilities. You all wanted this, didn’t you? This world of Shura, able to wield those weapons and talents of yours as you please.”
While the True Demon King was no more, the strength they left behind still churned beneath the surface.
TAREN THE PUNISHED
A former general of the unified nation Aureatia. Now with the True Demon King defeated, she has risen up to lead a group of the individually superpowerful, to once again rule over the world with fear.

ISHURA

I

The New Demon King War

Keiso

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New York

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Translation by David Musto
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Afterword

CHAPTER 1 Soujirou the Willow-Sword

This was the tale of one person.

For Yuno the Distant Talon, the story began with the memory of her old schoolmate Lucelles.

Lucelles was a beautiful girl. Silver hair that flowed with sunlight. Aquamarine, almond-shaped eyes peeking out from under her long eyelashes. Though a minia girl, she was more enchanting than an elf or vampire—even other girls like Yuno thought so—and she seemed to sparkle more than anyone else, not only in their training school but throughout the whole of Nagan City.

Thus, after the classes were divided up and Lucelles came over during Word Arts class to ask her for instruction, Yuno couldn’t contain the joy bubbling up inside her.

Lucelles choosing her (and her slight proficiency for the Force field of Word Arts) from among all her fellow classmates and recognizing her singular talent was the first time Yuno had ever taken pride in anything.

Yuno chatted with her, straining the limits of her reticent nature.

In their conversations, Lucelles was surprisingly timid, in contrast to her glamorous appearance. Additionally, her poor grades plagued her mind with worry, the same as any other girl her age. However, her consistently thoughtful and kind manner of speaking did not betray Yuno’s adoration. Before long, Yuno realized that the two shared uncannily similar ideas when it came to the field of botany.

They found themselves unconsciously spending time together more and more often, teaching each other about the names of newly discovered stars, annexations by the kingdom, and which of the boy cadets caught their eye.

Nagan City was a place of learning, built around the Great Labyrinth at its center. It was also home to many residents with complicated personal histories. It was possible that Lucelles, too, having left her home far away and applying to the Explorer Training School, bore some complicated personal circumstances that were unknown to Yuno.

Nevertheless, even without ever broaching that subject, the two were able to remain friends.

Within the Great Nagan Labyrinth, created by the self-proclaimed Demon King Kiyazuna, remained innumerable relics and secrets, more than could ever be fully uncovered, even by the time the two girls reached adulthood. In this city, one’s race or past would not be determining factors in their potential to seize honor and glory.

With the death of the True Demon King, the age of terror had come to an end. Without the fear of death and destruction hanging over every head, it was possible to dream of a peaceful future.

—And that future was now.

“Augh!”

Lucelles’s body was trampled underfoot on top of the cobblestones of the flame-wreathed Nagan City.

Looming over her slender back was a massive and hollow suit of armor, its metallic luster tinted green, limbs thick and heavy. Its head was mostly buried within its body, with only the glow of a singular blue eye visible—a cogwork golem.

“An—ngggh!”

Before Yuno’s eyes, Lucelles’s beautiful arm was casually twisted twice around before being ripped from her body.

“L-Lucelles……”

It was mere coincidence that it was Lucelles beneath the golem instead of Yuno.

Lucelles had fled to the left and thus was caught by the golem as it flew out of the stone alley.

The golem, boasting a heavy metal carapace, impenetrable to any blade, was strong enough to twist a horse’s body in two. For the girls, confronting it was a death wish. Escape would be impossible.

That was all there was to it.

“No! It can’t be! No!” Yuno cried. All she could do was look at the ravaged bone and flesh poking out from the base of Lucelles’s beautiful shoulder. Lucelles wasn’t even able to let out a dying scream, her whole rib cage being crushed into the ground.

She spoke in a hoarse, gasping whisper.

“It hurts… I-it, *hngggh…gaaah…*”

Was there any greater despair than being powerless while watching a loved one die a slow, agonizing death?

…Though, perhaps it wasn’t despair Yuno felt.

Perhaps there was but a small sliver of relief within Yuno that Lucelles’s final words weren’t a plea for rescue.

Her beloved Lucelles. The Lucelles she had adored more than any other…

The golem continued, ripping her left leg out of its socket as well. The fatty membrane and threads of sinew resembled meat on a butcher’s table, and her writhing knee sagged loose in the golem’s grip.

The automaton showed zero emotion as it did to the beautiful Lucelles, the object of Yuno’s admiration, what it had done to all other residents of the city—dissect her alive.

She was a normal girl, surprisingly timid despite her bright and glamorous appearance.

Yuno fled from the ruined Nagan City as she heard Lucelles’s agonized death throes.

“Augh…! Gaaaaaaugh!”

As she ran, the scenery melted away into a distorted heat haze.

The fact that, in her desperate and delirious escape, she had avoided being caught by any of the golems wandering through the city might have been divine misfortune.

Her bloodied legs finally stopped at the top of a hill where she and Lucelles had shared many memorable days off together.

A mixture of dirt and blood traced her brow before dripping off her forehead. She couldn't even worry about her braided ponytail, now frayed and loose.

Nagan Labyrinth City. Centered around the labyrinth of cogwheels and iron, the city was one of learning and technology, encircled by bronze-adorned shops and schools.

Atop the hill, the scenery visible through the gaps in the thick green of the tree branches looked totally otherworldly compared to the nature surrounding it, yet strangely harmonious at the same time, providing a wonderful view.

There was nothing left. The city, the flowers… All had gone up in flames. Figures were still visible, moving around among the cruel conflagration. Immune to the heat, these were the crowds of merciless golems.

"…I should've…," Yuno mumbled, dazed by everything so unrecognizably changed.

Lucelles was there inside the flames. Old Lady Miller the baker, her classmate Zend, the seemingly invincible Mrs. Kiveera, Menov the elf, the blind poet Hill; they were all there, too.

She clawed at her head.

"I—I…should've been torn apart… I should've died, too…!"

No one had known. Not a single person had realized.

Even though the appearance of the True Demon King had upstaged them, those who had once declared themselves as such, the *self-proclaimed* Demon Kings, were still exactly that—Demon Kings, the very worst threat menacing the people of the world.

…Within the Great Nagan Labyrinth, created by the self-proclaimed Demon King Kiyazuna, remained innumerable relics and secrets, more than could ever be fully uncovered, even by the time the two girls reached adulthood.

That fact had never been truer. That day, the labyrinth, generating golems on an unprecedented scale, sent Nagan City into ruin in a single morning.

The citizens weren't even allowed enough time to wonder what was happening and why. Her instructors, the ones who should have known the truth of the situation, were burned alive first, before they could even escape their staff building.

Qualified explorers, a status that felt totally out of reach to Yuno and Lucelles, had gone out to face the golem throng as it swarmed like ants, only to be mowed down with unbelievable ease. First-class explorers,

second-class explorers, it didn't matter. Yuno saw even the twenty-fourth-class explorers, barely half her height, get dissected alive as well.

"I can't…I can't take it…"

The blue glow of the golem's eyes shined through the copse of trees. They were this far outside town. Not even a girl as broken as Yuno was safe.

Now, Lucelles was no longer walking to her left. She sensed she was going to die just like her friend.

"No… *Uno io shyipice un2 lino.*" (From Yuno to the Fipiq arrowhead. Second finger axel.)

"Zrk."

Together with an inorganic squeal, the golem's forward dash dug up the ground beneath it.

At that moment, Yuno shouted:

"Corro enuha, 8dihine, viradma!" (Lattice star, bursting spark, churn!)

Honed iron gravel split open from inside her sleeve. Rapidly shooting out in an arc, it sliced through the gaps in the golem's armor.

There came the metallic scrape of a direct hit, like a bird's warble. *Kreech. Krakee, krakee, kreek.*

"Zr-zrrk, krssht…krsk."

Having been pierced in some fatal inner part, the giant body stopped moving.

The golem was an elaborate mechanized doll, brought to life through Word Arts, engraved into a seal, the location of which differed from golem to golem. Yuno had learned that in school.

…However, her daring feat was little more than a coincidence, and a miraculous one at that. She hadn't been aiming for any point in particular. Nothing more than the Force Arts of a girl who had all but run out of options.

She could grant speed to pebbles she had sharpened herself. Her second name was Yuno the Distant Talon.

"Wh-why…? Why?!"

Using her technique to narrowly escape with her life, Yuno nevertheless recoiled in bewilderment and despair.

Among all Word Arts, she was only slightly skilled with Force Arts. That was her one redeeming feature.

"Why…? How could this, how could that kill you…?! B-back there, I…I could have saved her?!"

Yet, when Lucelles was in danger, Yuno had been unable to do anything.

Despite believing her only way to atone for escaping was to be torn apart and die just like Lucelles, she had nonetheless just used arts to try to survive.

How shameful, how base, Yuno the Distant Talon—was that all your feelings of friendship toward your precious Lucelles amounted to?

"I can't take it… *Aaaaaugh…!* Lucelles…"

Covering her face with both her hands, she again took off running on scarred bare feet.

No matter where she tried to hide in the forest, slowly being encircled by the blaze, she was sure to run into the terrifying golems. Still, living on, burdened by this sin and regret, was itself just as hellish.

…Sure enough, passing through the trees and into a plaza, there were six of the giant metal soldiers waiting for her.

She sent her stone projectiles flying with a shriek. However, the same miracle did not manifest itself twice, and all her attacks were repelled by her targets' fully encompassing curved armor. There was no other way for her to stand against them.

"Zrk."

"Zr-zrrrk."

"K-kill me… Hey…no matter what I say, you're going to kill me, right?! It'll all go exactly as I want it to! I want to die! Just…just let me…"

The cohort of reapers ignored Yuno's incoherent rambling and made their move.

The directive engraved within the golems of the Great Nagan Labyrinth was an extremely simple one—to advance on anything that moves within their line of sight and dismantle them.

The six golems, following said directive, tilted their bodies forward.

At the same moment, the golem farthest to the right slid to the ground. At least…everything from its waist up did.

Krrssshunk.

Burning leaves on the ground scattered.

Everything below the golem's waist remained upright. The heavy armor that no blade should have been able to puncture had a clean and parallel slice cut through its middle.

"What…?"

Something flickered between the trees. The speed made it seem like an illusion—was it light? Or shadow?

When Yuno finally tore her gaze away from the inscrutable phenomenon, she saw that the remaining five golems had been felled as well.

One had been split in two, another had been stabbed through the shoulder, another still was missing its head. Their severed cross sections were as smooth as a mirror's surface, clearly reflecting the red flames.

The cuts were too sharp— Then.

"Sup."

"Eek?!"

The sudden voice came from right beside her.

Yuno wasn't sure when he'd appeared. A hunched and short-statured man crouched at her feet.

He carried a single-bladed sword—one of the cadets' training swords—on his right shoulder. Clearly, the weapon had belonged to someone killed in the sea of slaughter.

“Oh… What’s your deal? Trying to die or something?” the suspicious man continued with his back still turned to Yuno.

All of it.

The common sense Yuno had developed throughout her life rejected the reality in front of her.

It’s all a dream.

The six golems had been laid low in an instant.

It shouldn’t have been possible for a cadet’s practice sword to bisect the armor so cleanly, when no cadet or any qualified explorer had been able to scratch it.

The golems didn’t stop moving even when their heads and arms were amputated, and for them to be cut down so effortlessly, as if it were inevitable—when even Yuno herself couldn’t comprehend the absurdity of how she had felled one—was wholly illogical.

It’s all been a dream. From the moment the labyrinth first came to life and all the golems appeared. All of it.

“Hey, you listenin’? I asked if you’re trying to die or something?”

“*Eep*, yes—er, um, no.”

“The hell’s that mean?”

The man chuckled to himself, standing up from his crouch.

Even after rising, the man’s back stayed unusually bent, so his eyes didn’t quite meet those of the seventeen-year-old Yuno.

He was clearly a minia, but his smooth features and goggle eyes gave his face a reptilian appearance.

“Dying’d be a real waste, y’know? Being human…gets a lot more fun from here on out.”

More unusual than anything else, though, were the clothes the man wore. A subdued red color, the velvety fabric had an elastic flexibility to it. On them was a white line that seemed to run down his arms and legs.

“F-fun…?”

“…Yup. *In my experience* anyway. Losing absolutely everything’s the best place to start. Then you get to decide where you’re gonna go and what you’re gonna do. It’s great, lemme tell ya.”

Absentmindedly listening to the man’s words, Yuno recalled the name for the man’s attire that she had learned in class. It belonged to a different culture, from somewhere far, far away from her own world.

It was called a “tracksuit.”

“…A Visitor.”

“C’mon…this town calls me that, too? Whatever. Call me whatever ya want.”

Someone who appeared from *the Beyond*—a place with a different culture, a different ecology, where even the number of moons in the sky differed from Yuno’s world.

A rarely seen outsider, introduced to this world from the Beyond, who sometimes brought prosperity and ominous tidings others.

An individual from a far-off world, distinct from this one. These were known as “Visitors.”

“Um, you…j-just now, with those golems…”

“Hmm.”

The man simply looked back down to the base of the hill. Yuno followed his gaze.

She looked at the scene spread out before her.

“N-no, impossible…! A-all of them…? By yourself…?”

“Boring as hell.”

Still resting his sword on his shoulders, the man turned up one corner of his mouth into a half smirk.

It was a sea of steel carcasses.

In the hollowed pit, hidden from view at the top of the hill, countless numbers of diced, inoperative golems were piled up in a heap. Their cores, hidden within their armor and with no two golems having them in the same place, had been unwaveringly and cleanly cut through, ending the creatures’ animatronic existences.

It was impossible to reason out where a golem’s weak point was from the outside. Was such a feat even possible?

“Didn’t think you guys’d have machines in this world, too. What’d you call ’em again? Golems? I’ve cut down a helluva lotta ’em by now, but they don’t put up much of a fight…”

“—Didn’t put up much of a…fight?” Yuno blankly murmured, looking down at the carcasses.

Everyone who lived in the city, people who trained themselves hard to challenge the mechanical labyrinth, constantly and automatically rearranging its whole configuration, wasted away underneath the massive army of metal and steel.

The golems’ structure was no mystery. If anything, those who challenged the Great Nagan Labyrinth and its unending stream of automaton guards were much more skilled at fighting golem opponents than warriors from other cities. Even the regular soldiers of Aureatia, the largest central nation in the land, would fare no better in the face of this disaster.

In which case, this one man—who had opposed this walking, city-destroying nightmare and bested it with a single sword—was the real monster.

The wind, carrying the heat of the flames, actually felt cool on Yuno’s wet cheeks.

“Bleh.”

Opposite her, the Visitor put a piece of some nearby grass in his mouth before spitting it back out.

“Seriously? This grass ain’t the edible kind?”

“U-um… If that’s root tussock grass, then no, it’s inedible. It’s actually quite poisonous.”

“Figured as much. Hey, you gotta have some food on you, right?”

“Y-you…should really run while you can!”

Even when faced with an immeasurable strength completely outside her world’s physics of logic and reason, Yuno couldn’t find anything else to say. She already knew the truth. The Great Labyrinth, created by the self-proclaimed Demon King Kiyazuna, and the town where she and Lucelles had lived together, had become the very definition of a living hell.

“No matter…how strong you may be, this city, it’s impossible…!”

“Whoa now, no need to get upset. What’s so *impossible*, huh?”

“Wh-what…? Don’t you see it?!”

Yuno pointed down toward the scene of Nagan below them.

She didn’t point toward the endless swarm of golems, the horde of destruction blanketing the city.

Her finger was directed at the far end of the fiery haze.

“You think you can defeat *that* with just a sword, too?!”

An enormous shadow, larger than any of the city buildings and closer to a mountain in height, was swaying back and forth.

It was shaped like a person.

…Yes, this was the real nightmare. Looking out over the city where she had grown up, she saw looming above it an impossible fantasy.

The Great Nagan Labyrinth had started to move, and a huge swarm of golems had appeared. This was a fact, not a metaphor.

No one had known. Not a single person had realized.

Perhaps the structure had served to show enormous military might. Maybe it had been created in an attempt to defeat the True Demon King, who’d plunged every corner of the world into indiscriminate fear, including the legendary golem creator, the self-proclaimed Demon King Kiyazuna.

At the far end of the blaze, the Great Nagan Labyrinth roared. It was a noise as resonant as the raging sea.

“Hey.”

…Without answering her question, the man pointed his sword straight at Yuno.

The inexperienced girl couldn’t yet detect another’s urge to kill, but nevertheless, with the sword pointed straight at her, she had a sinking feeling death was imminent.

The sword’s tip grew hazy.

“—Hi-yah!”

“Zrk.”

Behind Yuno, a golem was skewered.

He had bent down even farther, stepping forward and going through Yuno’s legs to make his thrust—piercing the golem’s core from a position invisible to his opponent.

He had kicked the pommel of his sword hilt up through the golem.

“Wh-why did you use a move…like that…?”

She didn’t feel any sense of shame in having him dive in between her legs. It was over before she could even register what had happened.

His sword skills were not normal.

There was no world out there, let alone Yuno's, where his system of sword techniques made any sense. She was terrified. Terrified at this presence before her, whose existence was far outside her realm of comprehension.

Skillfully flipping up the tip of the hilt with his toes, the Visitor once again slung it on his shoulder.

"Are you *sure* you don't have any grub? Grass, bugs—anything's fine. I haven't had breakfast yet, y'see."

"I—I have a…um…a packed lunch. But, um, it doesn't have much flavor."

"Damn, you sure know how to make things difficult. Fine, fine, we'll trade. You, fork over the food."

The swordsman stared off at the other end of the haze.

"—In exchange, I'll go ahead and handle that giant dude over there. I was thinking of cleaning him up soon anyway."

Yuno looked at the sword. It was the same kind of worn-out, light practice sword provisioned to her. It was indeed the only weapon with which the man was equipped.

What exactly could this man do? Did he have some brilliant strategy in mind? Maybe some mighty-strong allies lying in wait somewhere? Maybe he had at least one kind of offensive Word Art at his disposal?

"Time to take 'em down. Sound good? Bet it'll be a hoot."

"……"

"You're enjoying yourself."

Battle, bloodshed, being brought to the brink of death—this warrior was savoring it all.

Yuno had watched her homeland descend into chaos. Yet this small man with his unusual features was a demon from even darker depths of hell.

"What…wh-what are you?! What kind of technique is that?! Where did you come from?! Who are you?!"

At Yuno's deranged questioning, her companion's mouth twisted into an uneven smile.

This is how he replied:

"Yagyuu Shinkage-ryuu."

What would happen once she knew about this man's otherworldly origins?

Was his self-description really true or not? Yuno had no way of hoping to understand one way or the other.

"—Soujirou Yagyuu. You're looking at Earth's last Yagyuu."

He came from a world other than this one…*the Beyond*.

A rarely seen outsider, introduced to this world from the Beyond, who sometimes brought prosperity and sometimes ominous tidings.

This master swordsman brought with him the most ominous tidings of all.

◆

“Hey. Lemme ask you something. That technique you used earlier…was that one o’ them Word Arts I’ve been hearin’ about? How’d you do it?”

“What…?”

“That thing you did, where you throw stones. You can teach me that, right?”

Yuno recalled the difference between Visitors and the people of this world. She had learned about it in class.

The Force Arts Yuno used must have looked unusual to the otherworldly swordsman. It might have been the only real reason he had saved her life in the first place.

“Um, I learned that Visitors…or anyone else not born of this world can’t use them… The world of the Visitors communicates through a sound language, so their cognitive abilities can’t keep up.”

“*Sound language?* Ah, yeah, I guess that makes sense. Not like you guys are speakin’ Japanese here.”

“…We’re able to communicate like this through Word Arts. For Force Arts and Thermal Arts…you use those Word Arts and ask to move things, burn things… Ask the wind and other physical objects directly…”

The *Japanese* Soujirou referred to was not a language as Yuno and the people of her world would define it, but more of a technique that required different tones passed through the air to be used effectively.

It was true that sound was a necessary intermediary for conversation. It was possible to communicate with other races no matter what words were contained within those sounds, even when those sounds were the roars of beastfolk.

Any sentient creatures within this world were able to do this, but Yuno had heard this was different in the world from whence Visitors hailed.

“That so? Forget it, then. Looks fun but sounds like a pain. I’ll stick to swords.”

That was the extent of his reaction. He had asked about it only out of curiosity.

It was absurd. Neither big talk nor a bluff, this man…intended to take on the boundless Dungeon Golem with nothing more than a single practice sword.

“I-it’ll kill you…!”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“What…?! No amount of slicing and dicing is going to affect that thing! Even if you beat it, no one will thank you! You’re just an outsider who blew in from parts unknown! Isn’t it better to run away?!”

“Why?”

“I—I mean…if you die, that’s it!”

“Is it now?” Soujirou plainly questioned.

"……"

"If you're up against some unbeatable monster, you just give up?"

"But what could I do…?! That, that thing…it's a walking disaster… I can't fight something like that…"

"You ain't got anything to do with it. I'm gonna fight it because it's fun. That guy's *definitely* gonna be a ton of fun to fight, don'cha think?"

The red flames tumbled and rolled in the sparkling reflection of his round eyes.

In those eyes shined a certain *madness* for battle, enough to bring Yuno's senses back from the abyss of despair.

"Time to go."

Soujirou's gait was as leisurely as if he was walking through the market to do some shopping. Yuno had no time to cry out and stop him before he proceeded into the sea of flame.

The warrior's small frame crossed over the hill. Immediately, golem-shaped figures swarmed together. All of them were cut down by his blade, flashing around like refracted shimmers of light.

His diminutive outline disappeared in the elaborate city streets, and Yuno quickly lost sight of him. Many golems gathered at the spot where she last saw him, but they would be unable to lay a hand on Soujirou. She knew that.

Cutting through enemies, the flames, even the air itself, Soujirou plunged toward the mountain-size behemoth.

The sparkling blaze was bisected, a dark, thin path advancing through it.

As far as Yuno knew, even the most fleet-footed explorers couldn't run through the city with the same speed as Soujirou. Even if she searched across all the horizons, she wasn't sure she could find anyone who could traverse that ruined terrain with thick black smoke clouding their vision and the explosive roar of the conflagration drowning out their hearing.

Soujirou pushed forward. The colossal figure swayed, and its outline shifted. The Dungeon Golem raised its arms.

"Hwoooo—ooo—"

The golem's rumbling roar caused the very hilltop to tremble. The ferocity of the golem's fist, violently slamming down on Soujirou's position, created enough of a tempestuous wake to send debris flying, radiating out from the point of impact.

It stood to reason the pint-size minia Soujirou must surely have become dust in the wind.

But no—at that moment, Soujirou was running up the golem's colossal left arm, still thrust into the earth.

It wasn't an impossible task—theoretically speaking.

However, the incline was, from the perspective of a minia, a sheer cliff, if not steeper. The small silhouette ran upward, using the golem's jagged body for footing, and the unwavering speed of its ascent was nothing short of extraordinary.

“Hwooooooooooo—”

The nightmarish bellow drowned out every other sound in the city, its vibrations making the flames quiver and tremble.

The black cloud that immediately enveloped Soujirou as he reached the golem’s shoulder looked like a swarm of locusts from Yuno’s distant vantage point. They weren’t locusts, though. The black cloud was a combination of arrows fired from the mechanisms covering the Dungeon Golem’s body and the golem horde, trying to swallow up Soujirou within their surging numbers, like a storm-tossed sea.

The Dungeon Golem was a monster that could summon only brute strength. It was a walking calamity, with masses of weapons combined together inside its gigantic form.

The true form of the impenetrable Great Labyrinth that had blocked any and all explorers from its depths for more than twenty years was a monolithic golem, adopting a bipedal form to wreak destruction. Ramparts to defend from attacks, turrets to send out counterattacks, and barracks to build mechanical soldiers were all included within its towering frame.

Soujirou’s figure vanished into the dark cloud. The peerless swordsman challenged an incomprehensible monstrosity, and his efforts had ended in vain—or so it seemed.

But that was not so. The Dungeon Golem’s countermeasures were still active.

The attention of the monstrosity’s enormous single blue eye was focused on an irregularity in its arm. A long black slice had appeared there. A diagonal gash was carved in its left arm.

“Heh.”

With the practice sword still stuck inside the tip of the wound, Soujirou gave a bestial sneer. The next moment, he jumped off from the golem’s left shoulder, evading the horde, and used the force of his descent to slash the Dungeon Golem’s massive leg.

His movements had gone beyond the realm of reason.

Arrows. Cannons. Ever more golems, on top of it all. In the blink of an eye, Soujirou jumped from one point to the next, rushing through like a murderous cyclone, with his small shadow dashing about.

The Dungeon Golem’s profile also shifted dramatically. With a speed that was terrifying to witness, it swung the left leg onto which Soujirou had grappled.

“Coooooooo ___ ”

“……!”

The fierce centrifugal force launched Soujirou and the whole golem horde up into the deadly open air. For just a single minia, the vast difference in the scale of the attack made it impossible for him to outdo it with unbelievable speed or technique.

“Llll ____ Luuuaaaaaaa ____ ”

The Dungeon Golem's howl was clearly distinct from its previous bellowing roars, which had lacked a brass tone.

The complex mesh of stone and iron that formed its chest armor had opened wide, and the light from the molten steel boiling inside, supernaturally blue, brightly illuminated the remains of Nagan.

"Luulaaal lel leee. Luolaue eeolu." (From Nagan to the heart of Naganerla. Light the night as the day.)

Yuno, together with a kind of resignation, watched the ending before her.

…Oh. There it is.

It was the light that had burned Nagan to the ground.

The Dungeon Golem was a weapon the self-proclaimed Demon King Kiyazuna had devoted all their skill and magic to creating, built to defeat the True Demon King. It could think, deal with the incomprehensible martial mastery of Soujirou, and its intelligence even allowed it to use Thermal Arts.

The metallic brass tone was an incantation.

"Lea lelooro. Looau luuaao. Leeo luouu—laaa." (Passing high clouds. Edge of heaven and earth. Overflowing great seas—burn.)

A flash of destruction, and flames pierced the heavens.

The light's trajectory split the clouds like an open maw.

Wind and heat exploded in waves, with the fires on the ground nearly being snuffed out entirely.

Right below the ray that split open the sky, the river turned to vapor, and even from her distant spot on the hill, Yuno could see the sky begin to burn like an evening sunset.

Now then.

Was the Visitor from another world Soujirou also transformed into a wisp of vapor?

Yuno looked at the golem's outline, thrusting up into the sky.

She looked at the wasteland, void of enemies, and the iron machinery capable only of ravaging everything in its path.

Penetrating the explosive flames, a pair of eyes shined like a star of extinction.

The light—

The light began to slowly subside.

The Dungeon Golem's head fell to the ground.

"*…Heh.* All right, I get it now. So that's Word Arts, huh?"

He was behind the open cross section of the golem's neck.

The strange swordsman, who should have been utterly obliterated after being knocked into the air and taking the destructive thermal blast, somehow survived.

It would have been impossible to grasp unless one had been surveying the situation from Soujirou's vantage—the moment before the blue molten steel Thermal Arts released.

In truth, just how much of a contrast was there between the Thermal Arts and the incomprehensible sorcery he'd used to evade that fireball of death?

Most likely, no one but him would believe that, launched into the air with the golem horde, he had kicked them ahead of him like skipping stones or that he had been able to instantly ascertain that the apex of his jump trajectory would bring him to the golem's head.

With that superhuman feat, he had conquered the attributes of the Word Arts he had heard from Yuno.

Word Arts commanded phenomena. Even destructive Thermal Arts had a designated direction and range of effect.

Therefore, it was impossible for the golem to send attacks toward its own body. That included the back of its head.

Its stone neck, thicker than a temple pillar, had fallen. The cross section was dyed orange. It reflected the light of the flames like a mirror. An absurdly clean and straight cut.

Such a phenomenon, transcending all physical laws of the world, could only be considered a deed of demonic swordcraft.

"Wwwwooooooohhhhhh ___ "

It came the moment Soujirou again rested his sword on his shoulder. An earth tremor, like a scream from deep within one's chest, shook the air. It wasn't a final dying breath. Though a reality-bending titan, the Dungeon Golem was a golem nonetheless, animated by way of an engraved core. Such a lifeless giant weapon couldn't experience death.

"Yup. Guess yours ain't here…"

At that moment, the monster began swinging its right palm down on Soujirou as he stood on the level surface that had once been the golem's neck.

The swordsman again leaped into the air. If the giant weapon was like a person, then the swordsman was more akin to a mosquito. The nimble speed he used to avoid the massive strike only underscored the comparison.

Without its head, its vital operational organ, the giant weapon tried blindly to knock off the enemy perched on its right shoulder.

The vast difference in the scale of the attack made it impossible for Soujirou to outdo with unbelievable speed or technique—

"—There's that life of yours."

◆

1565, the eighth year of Eiroku.

Kamiizumi Nobutsuna, purported to be the master swordsman of the era, visited the Yagyuu lands together with his disciple, Jingo Izunokami.

At the time, the founder of Yagyuu Shinkage-ryuu, Yagyuu Muneyoshi, took Jingo Izunokami on as an opponent, and after defeating him with the so-called muto-dori—disarming and stealing your opponent's sword with

your bare hands—Kamiizumi bestowed the Shinkage-ryuu school to Muneyoshi.

Some theories suggest that when a master swordsman swung their sword, it could reach speeds of close to 130 kilometers per hour. Additionally, the average blade length of a sword at the time was 0.8 meters long.

Now, with that in mind, was it even possible for an unarmed person to dodge through a 0.8-meter radius, faster than a 130-kilometers-per-hour sword swing, restrain the opponent's sword hand, and instantly disarm them?

In reality, the muto-dori doesn't refer specifically to this technique but instead collectively to unarmed defensive techniques utilized against an armed opponent…though it has also been explained as a simple mental attitude that a sword, brandished in opposition, can in fact still save one's life.

There are even some who see the abovementioned muto-dori as an overexaggerated and made-up anecdote.

Was it really possible to dodge with such speed and disarm an opponent within so short a window?

◆

"Found it. There's your weak spot."

Soujirou, who had been standing on the Dungeon Golem's shoulder just moments before, was now in the air. Reading the movement of the golem's left arm, coming down to knock him away, he evaded the attack and jumped forward.

With superhuman leaping power, he seemed to have turned himself into a human missile with his slashing attack.

"That's it."

There was a loud crack.

The sound of something rupturing. It rattled out from the straight chasm sliced into the Dungeon Golem's left upper arm. He had been aiming for the Dungeon Golem's weapon from the very start—its left arm itself.

Just the same as before, he lengthened the initial slash he had carved into the golem's left arm even further.

He had made only a notch on its surface.

It was impossible to sever the entire arm, thicker than a city spire, with the blade of a practice sword.

However, things were different right now, as it swung its left arm down. The added stresses from the straight incision came with the tremendous centrifugal force of the golem's colossal body weight.

"Hoo—o!"

There was an explosion.

The giant weapon's left arm, aimed at Soujirou as he jumped off its right shoulder, split apart at the laceration under the enormous weight of its own body.

With this, the fractured end of its left arm sailed forward, piercing its own right shoulder like a bomb dropped from above and crashing deep into its body.

Soujirou's true target wasn't just the section of the left arm he had crippled. It was the Dungeon Golem's life core, hidden deep within its thick frame, far beyond the reach of a direct strike from his sword. The inner mechanism of its right shoulder, blown apart under the gigantic weight of the golem's own left arm.

He had disarmed his enemy.

Were all the legendary tales of swords and swordsmen truly nothing more than conjured-up fantasy?

It happened as the golem's arm, nearly a hundred times his size, rushed down to crush the swordsman.

Was it really possible to dodge with such speed and disarm an opponent within so short a window?

"Muto-dori."

Yes, it *was*.

The eccentric swordsman didn't see the results for himself. He slid off the golem's unstable torso, down its core, and past its waist. He continued hopping down the titanic mechanical body, unharmed as if by some natural and foreseen divine providence.

Shortly after Soujirou's small figure moved, all the mechanisms in the bigger figure began failing, the golem collapsing and sinking into the earth. Even the Dungeon Golem, created by the self-proclaimed Demon King Kiyazuna, reacted like any other golem robbed of its Word Arts core.

It had taken less than a day for the Dungeon Golem to bring ruin to the Nagan Labyrinth City and less than a day for it to be destroyed.

◆

Dust and ash spouted up into the air, like an inverted waterfall.

Yuno the Distant Talon drank in the scene before her, dumbfounded.

"…He really took it down."

Returning to the hill unfazed, Soujirou looked like a minia. Not a gigant or a dragon. Just a minia, the same as Yuno herself.

"Got 'em. That was even more fun than killing those M1 guys."

"How, Soujirou…? How did you do that…?! I thought… I didn't think anyone would be able to stop a monster like that…"

"Huh? Just gotta put yourself in the shoes of whoever made the thing. Its feet didn't reach straight down to the ground. Too much weight on its waist. A weapon that shoots fire in its chest. It used its left arm first to attack. Only thing left was the upper part of its right arm."

"……"

It was clear the man had read and made the same sort of judgments about every single enemy he had cut down that day. They weren't hunches or speculation. They simply came from the instincts of a savage killer.

There was one other thing Yuno had learned about Visitors.

The power of Word Arts didn't work in the distant land from whence they came. It was a very fragile world, completely held together not by words but by just the laws of physics.

"Soujirou, what's an *M1*…?"

"The M1 Abrams? Forget it, not like you guys out here will know anything about it anyway."

It was those individuals who possessed power that deviated too severely from the natural laws of the Beyond, unable to exist there any further, who then drifted to this world as Visitors.

It was possible the ancestors of the elves, dwarves, ogres, and dragons of this world also came from sudden mutations first born in the world of the Beyond.

"Okay, I'm outta here."

"…Wait."

Yuno called out to the departing Visitor.

The swordsman, a deviant from another world, was quite far removed from the normal young girl Yuno.

He took the form of a minia, but he was a monster, far surpassing the Dungeon Golem that had laid waste to Nagan.

"Soujirou. Here. It's just a packed lunch, though."

"Ah, yeah, that's right—I was hungry. I was having so much fun, I totally forgot. Thanks."

Ominous. Dreadful. Terrifying.

"Nice, this is delicious… *Heh.* Way better than bugs and grass, that's for sure. This world ain't too bad."

Still, after seeing the battle and having had her life saved many times over, Yuno finally understood the emotion welling inside her.

I get it. I—

Far beyond her reach, an emotion rose up that destroyed everything she had thought before, trampling over even her misfortune and grief.

I can't stand this man.

It was anger.

The Dungeon Golem and this Visitor were exactly the same.

Their absurd power looked down on the life she had led as puny and inconsequential, and someone as powerless as the young girl Yuno didn't even have the right to deny it.

"Next time. Next time, I wanna fight someone even more fun. Now, where should I go…?"

"……Aureatia."

"What now?"

“If you’re looking for strong opponents…you should go to Aureatia. Right now, they’ve become the biggest country there is.”

“That so? All the strong dudes are there, huh?”

“……Yeah. Aureatia’s council is gathering champions from around the world to decide on something really big and important. So I think…there will definitely be some people there who’ll put up a fight.”

“Nice. Sounds great.”

Yuno had a terrible and vague suspicion.

—Why had the Great Nagan Labyrinth come to life that day?

Perhaps the reason was because of a visit from an outsider swordsman, a guest from an inconceivable world beyond. Maybe its defense mechanisms had activated automatically after detecting a powerful threat, on par with a Demon King.

On the other hand…if this Soujirou man was a true monster of battle, willing to go to any reckless lengths in his relentless pursuit of powerful opponents, it was possible he’d actually activated the labyrinth himself, simply for his own enjoyment.

—*Vengeance.*

There was nothing else left inside her.

It didn’t matter if her animosity was misplaced or if there was barely a ghost of a chance her speculation was true… After losing everything, Yuno needed something within reach to prop herself up.

She would kill this man.

That’s right. In this world, there were those powerful enough to do it.

Even the Great Nagan Labyrinth had been artificially created… In this world that accepted all deviants brought over from the Beyond, there were still a limitless number of truths and threats, more than anyone could hope to fully uncover.

There was the Second General of the Golden City—known by one and all—Rosclay the Absolute. She knew the name of Trois the Awful, lurking in the far-off Wyte Mountains. Krafnir the Hatch of Truth, said to have mastered the fifth system of Word Arts, unknown to others. Kazuki the Black Tone came to mind, a Visitor who ended the Great Ice Flow nine years prior. Perhaps Lucnoca the Winter, who no one had ever seen before, too.

She had to show that there were those who could stand up to this man.

She had to learn just who he was and what this world of the Beyond was really like.

Finally, she would search across all the horizons for someone powerful enough to kill this unrivaled guest from another world.

“Soujirou. I’ll…I’ll show you the way. I’m just a Nagan graduate, but… that’s enough to avoid suspicions in Aureatia.”

“Sure. That’s a good look you got there.”

“…Excuse me?”

“Ah, nah, just thanking ya. Means that from here on out, you can do whatever ya like, too. Freedom.”

"……Right. Thank you."

Yuno smiled weakly back at Soujirou's snakelike grin, the edges of his mouth curled upward.

Lucelles was no longer next to her. The town she had lived in was burned to the ground.

She was free. Now, having lost absolutely everything, she felt like she could manage to do the preposterous.

"What's yer name?"

"Yuno……Yuno the Distant Talon."

With her hatred supporting her, she began to walk.

This was the beginning of their journey.

Now.

Dear readers, surely you are already aware.

This is but one person's story.

A single Shura, among a vast land crawling with countless hundreds of fiends and monsters.

Only the first of those seeking strife and conflict following the defeat of the True Demon King.

He was not wrapped up in the story; he *wrapped himself up* in this story on his own.

He was able to vanquish the largest golem in recorded history with a single blade.

He wielded unparalleled sword skills, unmaking universal legends into plain everyday truths.

He had a butcher's instincts, able to detect the fatal weak points on every and any living being he faced.

The last master swordsman, unable to be contained within the real world.

Blade. Minia.

Soujirou the Willow-Sword.

CHAPTER 2 New Principality of Lithia

West of Aureatia. The New Principality of Lithia, bordering an enormous flowing canal, was the only stronghold that allowed land travel from the west and north. The city was economically stable, with its abundant aquatic resources, and ceaseless caravan traffic drifted along its paved stone streets throughout the day.

However, today, the goods being carried by one of these carriages was neither clothing nor any sort of metal.

“Wyverns are drawing close. No doubt about it.”

A small woman pulled her upper body back through the tiny window and into the coach. On the outside, she looked no taller than a child, but she had come of age long ago. She was a minia woman named Lana the Moon Tempest.

“When they attack crowds of minia races, the bastards travel in large groups. Definitely wyverns, that’s for sure. Must’ve gotten a whiff from one of the merchants’ belongings… Slipups like that earn executions in the military.”

The subtle shadows, hazy in the blue sky, looked like a flock of birds from the carriage. Each one appeared no more than twice as tall as the average minia.

However, wyverns were far different from other birds in the sky. They were unmistakably draconic, with neither beak nor feathers, and were the fastest race, ruling over the world’s skies. While the group looked like nothing more than a vague speck at the edge of the horizon, they would catch up to a horse-drawn caravan in no time at all.

Lana looked up toward the driver on the other side of the carriage’s canopy roof and shouted:

“Hey, are we gonna make it to Lithia before the wyverns catch up? We’re only a stone’s throw away by now, right?”

“If you can see them, then it’s already too late! What about you, Miss Lana? Can’t you get those mercenaries to do something about it?”

Lana looked at the others sharing her carriage. Including herself, there were only three people in the coach.

“Let me go ahead and ask. Higuare, confident you could?”

“Of course. I could very easily wipe them all out.”

The body inside the coach replied flatly, without a stir.

The mercenary, named Higuare, was not a minia. He was a curious creature, his true form hidden underneath an elaborate cloak of what appeared to be tree roots. The tangled mass of vegetation was sitting just like any other minia race might.

“However, may I inquire something of you beforehand…? Regarding this self-proclaimed Demon King.”

The gleam of his eyes flashed from gaps in the roots covering his darkness-cloaked face. The sentient vegetation, beastfolk known as mandrakes, inhabited the deepest recesses of the forest and were an extremely rare presence to see in areas occupied by the minia races.

“I have heard such things regarding the ruler of Lithia, Master Taren. Even I myself am aware of the terror and atrocities committed by the True Demon King. Is this new master of mine a wicked person?”

“What, you came without even knowing about all that?”

Higuare was a mercenary who Lana had invited to the New Principality. Lana, as an intelligence officer sent across the land on orders from the self-proclaimed Demon King Taren, among the rest of the troops scheduled to arrive that day, was returning with particularly outstanding results to report.

“‘Self-proclaimed Demon King’ is the common name the kingdoms use. No one would actually go out of their way to proclaim themselves a Demon King.”

“I see. I’ve heard similar out on the frontier. If I remember correctly, the minia society is controlled by three kingdoms, is it not?”

“…How far behind the times are you? Aureatia’s the only one left now. The others got destroyed. The True Demon King’s handiwork. From Aureatia’s perspective, they’re the One True King. Those who call themselves rulers without any legitimate royal blood in them are referred to as ‘demonic monarchs’—self-proclaimed Demon Kings, in other words.”

Individuals with too much organizational power and Word Arts proficiency. Monsters that try to establish new races. Visitors who brought heretical political concepts to their world.

There was an era when all those with power declared themselves ruler, claiming territory and self-governance for themselves. The rulers of these hastily established smaller nations held no royal legitimacy, nor did they submit to any other authority—and were called “demonic monarchs.” Taren the Punished, once a courageous general before seceding from Aureatia and declaring her region independent, was not an unusual case.

…Only twenty-five years prior, the self-proclaimed Demon Kings were indeed referred to as Demon Kings. Until, at least, the True Demon King appeared.

“Was this True Demon King not a self-proclaimed one?”

“Well, see…they were the real deal. No one else could be called a Demon King compared with *them*. I’ve heard of your skill, but you don’t know much about the world, do you? Why don’t you start going to school in Lithia?”

Now, everyone was keenly aware that all the Demon Kings who had come before were nothing more than “self-proclaimed.” Minia races, monsters, even beastfolk and dragonkin had all been affected by it—the terror and malice.

The True Demon King had been the only true evil.

The three kingdoms, perpetually locked in conflict, were forced to dissolve and unite under the threat of the True Demon King. Most of the self-proclaimed Demon Kings were brought to order, or they challenged the True Demon Kings themselves and disappeared.

Evil wrought nothing but tragedy and despair—and thus, the current age was brought about.

"…Higuare, was it?"

The other person inside the carriage chimed in.

"Your life out in the country sounds like it was quite peaceful, huh?"

This person also did not belong to the minia races. Sitting with one knee raised, they had neither skin nor flesh to speak of. Indeed, they were nothing more than minia bone wrapped in a tattered cloak.

In truth, they had been a lifeless skeleton before. Beings created from Word Arts, including skeletons assembled from the bones of living creatures, were not created naturally and had no true life in them.

"Even the Visitors know more about the world than that. Got some nerve, being in the merc trade."

"That's right. Due to particular circumstances, I made my living solely through my swordplay. I'm oft known as Higuare the Pelagic. You are?"

"……Shalk the Sound Slicer."

Annoyance colored Shalk's reply.

Even faced with light provocation, Higuare's voice remained as flat as it had been prior. It was an open question whether a being originating from plant life would have emotions similar to the minia races in the first place.

"I don't particularly care, but can you two get along? If you kill each other or whatever before we arrive, I won't be able to face Taren. Not that I'd last long if caught in the middle of your fight. *Ha.* I'm a delicate girl, see?"

"I don't know about that."

"Do I look like someone who could stand up to you two?"

Lana shrugged, but she was speaking the truth.

Higuare the Pelagic. Shalk the Sound Slicer. The two mercenaries in the carriage with her wielded peerless skills and abilities unknown to the world at large, discovered through Lana the Moon Tempest's search across the four corners of the world. They were bona fide powerful warriors, and Lana's skills couldn't hope to compare.

Moreover, it was a handful of powerful fighters like these two who the self-proclaimed Demon King and ruler of Lithia, Taren the Punished, sought.

"Miss Lana."

"What?"

"Another group, separate from the wyverns, appears to be gaining on us."

Higuare's muttering barely finished before a dry sound reverberated from outside the carriage. With only a short stretch of road left until town, the time was right.

"Stop the carriage! Start shooting the ones who don't give up the goods!"

"Anyone who resists is getting dragged out and killed! Line up everything you got, and I mean *everything*!"

Lana peeked out from the carriage canopy to see a line of horsemen hot on the caravan's heels. Equipped with bows and muskets, they kept their faces hidden to mask their identities.

"…Bandits after the cargo."

The city was right in front of them, but that meant it was also where the guard was lax. The horsemen were confident they could finish things up faster than Lithia's soldiers could rush out and respond to the situation.

"First wyverns, now raiders? Today's not our day."

Naturally, Shalk's words were little more than a jest. While it may have been a desperate situation for a normal caravan, for Shalk the Sound Slicer, it warranted humor.

"Or more precisely…this must be this group's objective. Attack a caravan chased by wyverns on its flank to create chaos, then attack carriages that wander out and break formation… For instance, they might've stolen something at the last relay station and chucked it into the wyverns' nest. The wyverns chasing after our scent must've been their doing."

"The wyverns would just attack the raiders, too, wouldn't they? What's their endgame, then?"

"*Heh.* That's easy. They just gotta create fresh corpses for the wyverns to feast on."

"I see. What an awful way to go about it."

They heard a blast. A group of bandits was using explosives to spook the horses. The carriage transporting Lana, Shalk, and Higuare also began quaking under their feet, and the canopy lurched back and forth like it was floating along roiling ocean waves. Lana was held fast by her passenger strap, and she maintained her ground, despite her diminutive and easily tossed frame.

"…Whoa there! No need to worry, you two…! This isn't your time…"

She saw one of the raider-led horses start to run alongside the carriage now that its movements had broken into chaos. The brigand fixed his crossbow's aim on the driver.

"…not yet."

Before the trigger was pulled, before the bolt flew, the raider's horse vanished.

At least, that's how it would've seemed to the average eye.

Still seated in the carriage and looking down at the floor, the mandrake Higuare muttered: "Above us."

At his words, the raider was in the air. A wyvern, descending faster than its own shadow, snatched the hapless soul in its claws and lifted him into the air. Horse and all.

"Hnggah… A-ah! Gaaaah!"

"Grrrk."

The large wyvern, tearing out the raider's windpipe and cutting off the man's dying breaths, had not come from the swarm approaching the caravan's rear. The beast wore plate armor, like a minia soldier, and there was a crest stitched in the fabric on its back, revealing its origin. But most surprising of all was the fact that it had swooped in *from the direction of Lithia City*.

"No…you gotta be kidding me!"

"What're you doing?! The wyverns from behind—*gah*!"

The masterminds behind the assault saw their horses panic, and many of them shouted in confused anger one after another.

The mysterious wyverns that had appeared from the New Principality of Lithia marked not the cargo-laden caravan but the raiders as their sole targets.

The flock let out a spirited cry.

"*Graaah, graaark…* Next. Next meat… Meat!"

"Wyverns! Wyverns are pouring out of the city!"

"Wyvern *soldiers*?! N-no…it's impossible!"

Listening to the bewildered cries that spilled into the carriage from outside, Shalk muttered with suspicion.

"Lana, what's up with these guys?"

The situation was just as unbelievable by the standards of the peerless mercenary Shalk the Sound Slicer as it was to the raiders under attack. Despite being far removed from the minia races, even he found it odd.

"I can't believe I'm asking this, but these aren't *wyverns domesticated by the minia races*, are they?"

"*Heh.* And if I said they were?"

"I'd say you were out of your mind."

The Word Arts of this world made it possible for the minia-like and other intelligent races to communicate with one another indiscriminately. Even beastfolk like Higuare the Pelagic and their markedly different appearances, through their Word Arts commonality, were clearly differentiated from the actual beasts of the world, like the horses pulling their carriage.

However, as self-evident as it may have been, mutual understandings among intelligent races and the advisability of those races interacting with one another were two separate issues.

Wyverns were an extremely savage race, obeying commands only from the leader that ruled over their flock. Any living creature not affiliated with their flock, including other wyverns, was considered potential prey.

Consequently, they were this world's sole ruler of the skies.

A universal and natural enemy to all life on the ground.

“Hurry up and shoot them, dammit! Show no fear!”

“Sh-shooting arrows straight up into the air is craz— *Augh!*”

The ironclad wyverns endlessly descended upon their prey. The raiders tried to shoot arrows or stones back. However, gliding down to the lowest altitudes, one part of the flock took careful aim at these attacks and used their talons to effortlessly sever the raiders’ arms, if not their entire torsos.

With the bandits forced to take defensive measures against the raid from above, the wyverns made a surprise attack from their victims’ blind spot as they looked up in the air, having determined the bandits’ firearms most threatened their air superiority.

One of the wyverns cawed.

“*Kraaaaw…* Eraaaadicate…! Eradicate archers!”

The remaining raiders had no means to defend against the fighting power raining down upon them. Some fell from their horses in fear and were crushed under the hooves of their fleeing comrades’ mounts.

A one-sided rout. Red blood and white bone were scattered about, punctuated by the raiders’ screams of anguish.

The offensive wasn’t spurred on by feral instincts. There was a clear tactical strategy behind the wyvern soldiers’ attacks.

“Second General, go around the other side of the hill!”

There was someone high in the sky giving orders. This individual (with slightly more intelligible verbal skills) was too high up to identify from the ground.

“Judging from their raid route, the thieves have a carriage lying in wait to carry off the stolen cargo. Make sure you don’t eat any meat. Chop them into pieces and cram them into one of the carriage beds. Take a good look at the final moments of these fools who dared defy the New Principality… Women, children, elderly—it doesn’t matter; don’t leave a single one of them alive. Fourth squad, fifth squad, and seventh squad—prepare yourselves to engage with the oncoming *feral flock*. They must be no more than vulgar chaff on the verge of starvation if they’re chasing their prey all the way to minia settlements. Three squads of our army will be plenty. After cutting down enough of their number, let the younger ones kill them off as practice. Here, I’ll allow consumption of wyvern carcasses.”

It had continued from the moment the wyvern army had arrived. The voice continuously gave its orders. It was commanding an extremely effective surprise attack strategy, hiding their force high up in the sky to avoid detection before swooping in to mow down the raiders right as the enemy’s plunder was within their grasp. Almost like a minia army’s tactics.

“Elge, first squad. Your hind legs are injured, aren’t they, you wimp?! Fourth squad, Miroh, you’ve got a stray arrowhead stuck in your wing membrane. Focus up and fall back. No meat for you two.”

Hearing this incessant, shrill screech from where she was situation inside the carriage, Lana mumbled a name.

“…Regnejee.”

Previously on the verge of chaos following the raider raid, the merchant column was being guided to the New Principality by wyverns that had landed on the ground. Wyvern cries echoed on either side of the carriage as it continued forward.

“Grrrk!”

“Kraaa…graaaak!”

The wyvern flock, though formed into an army, followed its instincts, rending flesh from the still-living raiders—and those long since perished—and gouging out their eyes. In contrast to the grizzly spectacle, the wyverns didn’t even glance at the merchants of the caravan. They were clearly distinguishing who was prey and who was not.

It was strange behavior for wyverns, at odds with their nature.

“Lana the Moon Tempest.”

The one called Regnejee called out, closing in toward the mercenaries’ carriage.

“You’re returning now? You took forever, slacker. While you were gone, I cleaned up seven of these lousy raider mobs.”

The spy replied through the caravan’s canopy.

“I think it was time well spent. Actually, Regnejee……I’ve brought some guys even you’ll be surprised to see. The Sound Slicer and the Pelagic.”

“…Hmph. You didn’t bring the World Word?”

“The World Word is nothing but a rumor. They don’t actually exist.”

“Then these two aren’t worth much, are they?”

The skeleton, silently taking in Regnejee’s ridicule, picked up the spear at his side but remained sitting.

“……”

“Uh… Whoa, now. Let it go, Shalk. Don’t go picking fights.”

Lana hastily restrained the skeleton. Shalk the Sound Slicer had a bellicose temper.

“I’m supposed to stop? Someone’s got to teach this Regnejee guy the truth about that evaluation of his.”

“That’s just how he is. He’s like this with everyone.”

On the other hand, the other mercenary, Higuare the Pelagic, stayed as he was, looking down to the floor. Higuare was awfully quiet, unlike Shalk, but Lana still found it unsettling.

Regnejee’s orders to the army echoed.

“*Grrrrk…* The feral ones are here. Don’t let up. All you’ve done is finish off some lousy raiders.”

His interest appeared to have already drifted away from the mercenaries in the carriage.

“You fool! Attack! Prepare for air-to-air combat!”

The air burst open with a crack. The electric, thunderous sound came from the wyverns each flapping their wings and taking to the skies at the same time.

Those on the ground watched the two great airborne hosts fly next to each other. One consisted of feral wyverns. The other was a military force. As the glaring gaps between trained soldiers and amateurs were evident among minia, so, too, was the difference in fighting strength between the two wyvern flocks clear from the start.

The wild wyverns that led their group forward to challenge the soldiers, despite their overwhelming advantage in numbers, had their necks severed by the soldiers, whose advance remained unhindered.

Some of the feral wyverns ignored the soldiers entirely and tried to eat the people on the ground. In the middle of their descent, they were attacked from their blind spot overhead, falling to the ground with their skulls gouged out.

A flash of conical red light wove multiple times through the flock. Wyverns along the flash’s trajectory burned up and dropped to the ground, and though the giant clumped-together flock slowly fragmented, there were only feral wyverns falling from the sky. It was precisely managed Word Arts, performed at the speed of battle.

“That red light? That’s Regnejee’s Thermal Arts.”

“…Is Master Regnejee a wyvern?”

“Yeah. There’s always a leader in every wyvern flock. Regnejee’s theirs.”

“I’ve been thinking he seems to be the very cautious type, yes? He’s always within a close-order formation and manages to keep his exact position hidden.”

“…Higuare, you haven’t looked outside the carriage at all, right?”

“That’s right. I could tell by the sound.”

Only the flowers scattered across the quietly seated mandrake’s body showed any movement.

“Anyway, with them protecting us, the New Principality’s defenses—”

Interrupting her words, a sizzling roar of the air igniting echoed. Lana stuck her small frame outside the canopy and squinted up at the heavens. Unsurprised, she caught what she assumed to be Regnejee’s incanted Word Arts incinerate one of the feral wyverns from behind as it tried to escape.

Lana the Moon Tempest, a spy for the New Principality of Lithia, was long familiar with Regnejee’s way of doing things. Relentless and thorough in his wiles.

“…The defenses are flawless. There has never been a city in all of history that’s made use of wyverns’ airborne might before. Soldiers capable of seeing everything from a bird’s-eye view and who can maneuver around and cut off a force from any direction… On top of that, how are you supposed to handle their dragonkin strength individually, let alone a whole army of them? They’re invincible.”

“……Why did those raiders attack?” the skeleton Shalk asked, butting in.

“Unlike my empty skull, they’re supposed to have a brain stuck between their eyes, right? If the New Principality really is invincible, even raiders wouldn’t think to attack the city with a group that small.”

“……You’re right. To make a long story short…Shalk, Higuare, therein lies the reason why the New Principality needs you.”

“You’re saying the real enemies behind this aren’t some piddly raiders—is that it?”

There was someone inciting the brigands’ misjudgment. Someone who served to benefit from the raiders’ movements and from indirectly attacking the New Principality of Lithia.

Higuare mumbled again.

“The lord of Lithia… You said Master Taren was a self-proclaimed Demon King, yes?”

The famous general Taren the Punished had seceded from the sole kingdom of the minia races—Aureatia. She made the bountiful provincial canal city her own, declared independence, and gave it the name of the New Principality of Lithia. Her actions threatened control of Aureatia’s frontier and served as a major military provocation.

The appearance of a new Demon King in the age after the True Demon King’s demise.

“Oh, I see. I think I understand what’s going on now.”

The sound in the pearl-white mercenary’s voice sneered at the anticipated fires of war that seemed to be closing in.

With their invincible army, Lithia was trying to fight the strongest power among all minia races.

“We’re taking on Aureatia, then.”

CHAPTER 3 The Twenty-Nine Officials of Aureatia

Slightly to the east of the royal palace—the central congress hall, set up as a temporary governing body, looked brand-new, standing out against the other buildings in Aureatia.

Aureatia was the biggest metropolis and bore the crown of minia-kind's last remaining monarchy, but the core of the city's politics, in essence, lay not with the monarchy but instead were handled by twenty-nine bureaucrats who had long defended the city from the threat of the True Demon King.

Holding one of these limited positions was the Twentieth Minister, Hidow the Clamp, who came off both in appearance and attitude as the insolent young son of the nobility. Nevertheless, he had quick wits worthy of his position, and the young man commanded a certain degree of popularity.

"—I've heard about Lithia," Hidow began, unreservedly grabbing smoked meat from atop the plate in front of him. He still kept his hat while seated at a one-on-one dinner within the central congress hall.

"Their general is Taren the Punished, after all. Whether through negotiation or full-on assault, this isn't something that'll be cleanly dealt with overnight. Can't we be a bit more patient with this attack?"

"The reason we're talking right now is because that option's no longer on the table."

"Really now."

Hidow looked up. The man sitting across from him was a civil servant with a razor-sharp and shrewd demeanor. The small pair of glasses he always wore and his forehead, always creased in displeasure, would likely remain unchanged until the day the kingdom finally fell.

The Third Minister of Aureatia was known as Jelki the Swift Ink. He was more than ten years older than Hidow, but the Twenty-Nine Officials, on paper at least, all shared the same position, in spite of whatever rank they held.

Jelki pushed up the bridge of his glasses.

"……The Imperial Competition to decide the Hero will likely be an undertaking greater than any other we've had before. We can't alter these arrangements. Nevertheless, handling the New Principality of Lithia, who still openly defies Aureatia, is the matter of greatest concern when it comes to uniting the world under one banner. We can't waste time developing plots or levying economic sanctions to tear our enemy down… I believe the New Principality is aware of this themselves and is taking a hard-line attitude because of it."

"What's left, war? You can't be serious, Jelki."

“An absolute last resort, of course. We already depleted so many of our national resources on the True Demon King—we can’t afford to expend any more. That’s all the more when taking into account the forces expended in the Imperial Competition. However, the same is not true for the New Principality.”

A wyvern army, the only one of its kind. Sellswords of unknown origin hired on as extra security, scouted from far and wide.

These developments made it clear that the New Principality of Lithia was making moves to prepare for an upcoming war. Aureatia’s reluctance for renewed conflict made this, to the kingdom’s enemies, the perfect time to attack. If the principality’s current activities continued to be overlooked, even with superior national strength, Aureatia would be forced to endure tremendous sacrifices.

“Using raiders to attack their trade isn’t gonna be enough to get it done in the end, is it? Is there a more fundamental solution?”

“…I think the New Principality has a number of structural weaknesses. One is the government being built around Taren the Punished as the sole power. Still a young nation, they haven’t managed to properly train government officials and successors.”

“*Ha-ha*, seems like we’re on the same page here—a small number of assassins, sent after Taren.”

“Avoiding war being paramount, we can’t allow a large-scale commitment of troops. Furthermore, if we are going to plan this on our end, it will have to be done in secret. Do you think that’s possible, Hidow?”

“I see what you’re getting at. In my opinion, there’s another exception to add in there.”

Hidow skewered a selection of roasted vegetables on his fork.

“If they attack us *first*, then we’re free to attack them head-on, right?”

“I actively want to avoid any methods that would harm the people. Postwar cleanup costs money.”

“I know. We need to think up a way to get through the New Principality’s impregnable defenses, with as minimum a force on the front lines as possible, and take Taren’s head directly. Is the Seventeenth Minister’s… Elea’s assassin squad already working on it?”

Hidow, in part because of his youth, was not in a position among the Twenty-Nine Officials to have control over a specific division of his own. However, among the twenty-nine, there were some who bore responsibility for divisions dedicated to assassination and espionage.

“Her spies have been undercover in the city for quite some time. As for the Seventeenth Minister herself…she’s investigating another matter of equally grave importance. If we wait to start our operations until she returns, it will already be too late. As for subduing their wyverns, that duty falls under the Sixth General Harghent’s forces’ specialty, but—”

“No, you don’t have to tell me; I know. Better to have Old Man Harghent stuck doing something else anyway.”

“I feel the same way. He’s currently forming a dragon subjugation force.”

“A dragon…? Obviously not possible. The fool.”

Hidow spit out a laugh bordering on a deep sigh.

The Sixth General was clearly on the decline. His efforts weren’t wanted for the operation to begin with.

“So now it’s being passed to me, then?”

Additionally, the remaining two—both Hidow and Elea—were the youngest and the most prominent among the Twenty-Nine Officials. Youth also meant they had not accrued many public accomplishments to their names.

Bringing the New Principality of Lithia to its knees would surely give them sway during the upcoming Imperial Competition to decide the Hero. Additionally, the Third Minister Jelki was currently distancing himself from Seventeenth Minister Elea, and Hidow could see that Jelki didn’t seem keen on giving her any credit.

Hidow the Clamp didn’t crave these achievements or authoritative power. In fact, he thought that raising his status any higher than it was now would only bring him more trouble.

…That said, if I’m going to push my ideas forward, this is the time.

He glanced sidelong at Jelki’s glasses, reflecting the evening sun.

“It’s fine if whoever I use isn’t officially *involved* with Aureatia, right?”

“…I’ll leave it to your discretion as much as I can. Who do you plan on using?”

“You say assassin, but that doesn’t mean it has to be a cloak-and-dagger affair. For example, having the target get caught in a big accident is a possibility, too. As long as it doesn’t get traced back to us.”

This was a complex and dangerous matter, where failure was absolutely not an option and where he, as the younger man, would need to take sole responsibility. From a certain perspective, that was all there was to it.

However, Hidow understood this was how political tides moved.

Before he had been called to meet that day, Hidow had already been searching nonstop for the most suitable asset to handle the current situation. The state of affairs meant a normally unthinkable and dangerous solution was the most optimal…

“Ready the Vortical Stampede.”

CHAPTER 4 Alus the Star Runner

Even a man like Harghent the Still, Sixth General of Aureatia, in rare moments pondered the definition of evil.

A definition of evil to put his stock in during the current age, with the sole and absolute evil of the True Demon King now defeated.

To betray oneself.

This was what Harghent thought. With the ruins of the three kingdoms being unified under the Aureatia name and the political system on the verge of major change, he had still not cast aside his personal desires. Now was a perfect and unique opportunity to claim new achievements for himself.

Though bit players spoke ill of him behind closed doors, though the schemes and treachery wore at his soul, it was all a necessity to maintain a power and authority beyond his station. Further treasures, higher fame, and a stabler life.

If he continued as he had without a care for the looks of those around him, he could slowly expand his undeserved power.

Therefore, he had to carry out his current punitive expedition without asking for aid from the other generals. His intended enemy was a true legend—a god among the ancient black dragons—Vikeon the Smoldering.

Deployed to the Tileet Ravine in the northern frontier, the whole expedition force numbered thirty-six soldiers. The battlefield encampments, engulfed in the dry wind, were set up to host the brigade.

“You seem tired, Commander.”

The owner of the voice placed a cup of amber tea in front of the general. The color in the chief of staff’s cheeks always looked the same, without a hint of fatigue. His gentle smile suited his somewhat androgynous features.

It served as a perfect contrast to the dark circles under Harghent’s eyes.

“You appeared to have nodded off for a moment there, sir. Thankfully, none of the soldiers saw you do so.”

“Yeah. Peke, listen. It’s to be expected.”

Taking a sip of the tea, he felt the faint sweetness permeate deep through his body.

Harghent shrugged and tried his best to put on a dignified look.

“Well, it was a five days’ march from Aureatia to get here. And along the way…we had to camp out at a poorhouse, too. A big burden for anyone to bear, surely.”

“Yes, I am perfectly aware, sir. Shall I add a fruity aroma?”

“After actually setting out, I’ve realized that this distance itself may be a factor as to why the Smoldering has escaped attacks against him for hundreds of years…… Hmm… Yes, add some.”

“As you ordered, the guards have taken up their positions. They’ve tempered their bodies, unlike yourself, Commander, so there is no need for concern over their fatigue.”

The chief of staff had hit the nail on the head. While his ambition swelled, Harghent’s fitness only continued to wither with age.

“…Yes. That’s enough. How many radzio soldiers on patrol?”

“The personnel are divided into three groups. Two soldiers are on constant patrol at the top of the ravine, with four always resting at the troop quarters to be ready to take over shifts, with one of them staying at the receiver.”

“That’s low. Not good to reduce scouting when up against a dragon. Put three outside starting tomorrow. Have them take day and night shifts.”

“Understood, sir.”

Harghent the Still also had the nickname of Wing Clipper. It was an honorary title, earned from the hundreds of successful wyvern-culling expeditions he had commanded—though there was a chance the moniker was a derogatory one, too.

Harghent’s wyvern hunting employed a slightly different set of tactics from normal. He didn’t make a move while they were in their nests, instead waiting until the swarm took off and then blocking their paths of escape with arrows and Word Arts before stationing concealed marksmen around the valley to finish them off.

He believed that although a raid on their nests *looked* like the safest strategy, that wasn’t actually the case. There was a striking difference in intelligence among individual wyverns. A particularly crafty one could set up traps to waylay attacks on its nest and turn the hunters into the hunted. Another possibility was that the material inside their nests could also be used as a focal point for the wyverns’ Word Arts.

Given their opponent was Vikeon the Smoldering, an evil dragon known for his tremendous power, the natural course of action was to take even more precautions than when going up against flocks of wyverns.

“Vikeon is wounded, is he? I haven’t heard such a rumor in my twenty years of life.”

“I’m fifty-five. This expedition’s happening after investigating the findings of the survey troops and getting proof. This is a golden opportunity to wrest the advantage before the other generals catch on.”

“Left eye’s clouded. Left foreleg’s gone. And something that looks to be a long spear is stuck in his gut. His tail is decomposing. Very hard to believe… Supposing all this is true, do you think he’ll show his face while he’s in such a state?”

The terror of Tileet Ravine—burning down human villages on a whim, massacring ten thousand mighty adversaries in a single breath, and hoarding inexhaustible treasure for himself—Vikeon the Smoldering.

He was calamity incarnate. Save for being blessed with a one-in-a-million opportunity such as this, one could never hope to best such a mighty

opponent. If the expedition succeeded, Harghent's name was certain to be preserved in history forever.

Additionally, back in the unified Aureatia, the achievement would earn him a coveted position of power. No longer ridiculed as a small-time wyvern hunter, he would become a true dragon slayer.

"Peke. This is similar to a castle siege. The black dragon's leg and eye injuries aren't easily healed. The provisions in his lair aren't limitless, either. Hunger will eventually drive him to the skies."

"No doubt, provided this information is reliable."

Additionally, the troop numbers being flaunted in the ravine were in part to put pressure on Vikeon. The aim was to provoke him with their brazen presence, forcing him to stay on guard in case an attack came and draw himself into their hunting grounds.

Peke's apprehension also served as an indirect word of caution and reminder that by waiting for the perfect opportunity, they would deplete the patrols' morale. However, Harghent was thinking about a dragged-out battle—in fact, believed the time would come soon.

◆

Sure enough, before the sun had finished its descent, Harghent was proven right.

Rushing into the expedition headquarters, the radzio soldier's face was deathly pale.

"Chief of Staff! Commander! I have urgent news! Six of our marksmen are dead!"

No one had even announced that they'd spotted Vikeon. The bad news was very hard to believe.

"…What did you say?"

"We need communications first. Set up a link. Hurry!"

Following the chief of staff's orders, the soldier activated the radzio. The machinery employed a complex pattern of wires enclosed around a translucent stone. Radzio troops and their usage of long-distance communications were a vital part of Harghent's battle strategy.

"It's Harghent. Give me the situation! As precise as possible!"

<This is Dio, on surveillance at the left cliff! Black smoke is shrouding everything…! It's spread over the bottom of the ravine! Unable to confirm the status of the six marksmen deployed below the cliff! It's likely the Smoldering…is creeping along the ground and advancing toward the command headquarters!>

"A-along the ground…?"

The haughty Vikeon the Smoldering…who used to burn everything with great gouts of black smoke billowing from the sky and look down on the rabble crawling on the ground below… Rather than flying out from his lair, he was weaving his way through on the surface of the ravine?

It was unthinkable for a dragon to use his breath to attack soldiers from their blind spot while crawling along the ground like some common lizard or snake.

“Wh-why…?! Why is this happening?! V-Vikeon the Smoldering, have you lost your pride as a dragon?!”

Harghent had thoroughly researched the topography of the Tileet Ravine. The sky was a blind spot, so by using the elevation to guide the target’s path, he could slay the enormous dragon with minimal losses. He had also secured paths of retreat to line up with the opponent’s movements. It was the ultimate antiair formation, one that Harghent had compiled from his decades of combat experience.

Yet, because of his long years of experience, he couldn’t help questioning how sound his tactics were. What was truly terrifying was his own inability to account for all possibilities.

“Commander. Please fall back. We’ve failed. I don’t believe anyone knows how fast a dragon can move across land, but right now, these headquarters are in danger. Luck wasn’t on our side.”

“Y-you think… You think I’ll let things end like this?! Th-this…this can’t be happening! We need to make things right!”

Harghent knew it himself. His soldiers weren’t stupid enough to spread false or incorrect information. Unlike Harghent, they weren’t the type of men who refused to accept defeat.

Peke was right—this expedition had ended in failure. Six men had burned to death in scorching black smoke. At present, it was his own life that was in the most danger, yet—

“We don’t have time to waver! *Pike io Harghent himal walmirl!*” (From Peke to Harghent. Sloping sun. Fly!)

The chief of staff’s words changed into hastily woven Power Arts. Before Harghent had a moment to realize what had happened, the invisible force from the Power Arts buffeted him away.

“What in the—?”

A harsh wind blew through.

It was smoke, black as pitch.

Blown out of the main tent, Harghent caught sight of the jet-black smoke, like a curtain blotting out the sun.

The Breath Word Arts utilized by dragons. Vikeon the Smoldering used ultrahot Thermal Arts that enveloped everything in smoke before reducing all to ash, and the soldiers caught within that dark curtain were charred black, without so much as a single spark of flame.

Chief of Staff Peke. Radzio soldier Lainy. Imperial marksmen Milead and Hikya.

“You…you must be the general.”

The author of the near-instant massacre swaggered up through the smoke.

Vikeon the Smoldering. His jet-black scales warded away nearly all methods of attack and shrugged off the heat from his own breath. His massive figure was nearly as tall as one of the large troop barracks in Aureatia.

“I hadn’t planned on leaving anyone behind, but no matter.”

Now, with the crackling, scorched air forming a barrier between the two, the legendary nightmare had blocked off the ravine. Despite the heat in the air, Harghent’s biological instincts sent shivers through every synapse in his body.

His spirit overwhelmed all behind his presence. He was truly the strongest being beneath the sky.

“…Vikeon…! Damn you!”

Even with his right eye clouded over, his left front leg severed, a long spear sticking out of his gut, or his tail rotting away—his existence was different on a fundamental level when compared to the wyverns Harghent had hunted for so long.

“I shall let you respond. Are any more of your subjugation expeditions around?”

“What’s this…?! Afraid of minia hunting parties, are you, Vikeon?! You shall be the laughingstock of all dragonkin for the rest of time! It seems your spirit has withered as much as that body of yours!”

“Go gipyaeis jyguegyuorg!” (Fly upon Tileet winds. Dry up the billowing moon!)

A lethal black cloud passed above Harghent’s head.

Vikeon had missed on purpose.

“Answer me. Are you…the only…expedition? If you do not answer…you will not burn. You will suffer…a slow…agonizing…death.”

“……What?”

There was an uneasiness in the black dragon’s words.

Vikeon’s tactics were very unusual for a dragon.

Wounds covered his body. He was said to be the evilest of the ancient dragons, having lived through hundreds of years of failed expeditions to slay him.

All alone and standing face-to-face with the dragon, Harghent asked—

“…Wh-what’s happened to your body? Smoldering…! Even as I…as I, Harghent the Still, am met with your contempt and humiliation, you seek to conceal humiliation of your own! Who…who attacked you?!”

“……A champion.”

With a splattering sound, the vile dragon pulled back his festering left arm.

The injury seemed to embarrass the dragon.

“A champion…! Have you seen such things with your eyes, weakling Harghent? A rare mutant strain, a numerical oddity, from among the masses. They…they serve none but themselves—their damnable greed.

Their appetites lead them to amass power. Then, that hunger leads them far away to murder the powerful life-forms in our world…”

“You’re saying a minia champion attacked *you*—?”

“Arrogant fool!”

Vikeon roared with disdain.

No, not disdain. Even Harghent understood. What he heard was not hatred but fear.

“M-minia Heroes, ha! I’ve butchered more of those than I can remember! Ages pass, challengers appear… That brazenness has bestowed lives and treasure to me throughout the ages… Greedy in arrogance, hunted down, and killed—that is all Heroes are! All are but feed…trifling feed to sate my hunger!”

“Vikeon!”

“O, minia. Foolish minia! That perception of yours is itself an incurable brazenness, beyond even us dragons! Are there no other groups that give birth to Heroes beyond your own?! Are there no other places these powerful beings, blessed with talent and strength, appear besides those inhabited by you minia races?!”

As he howled in fear of his memories, groaning in pain from his injuries, the dragon’s single fiery eye glared at Harghent.

The terror of Tileet Ravine. Burning down minia villages on a whim, massacring ten-thousand-strong armies in a single breath, and hoarding untold wealth for himself. This was Vikeon the Smoldering.

There was someone out there who had already defeated this creature, a nigh calamitous power.

No matter what Harghent tried to say, he could no longer avoid death. What Vikeon had made clear was that he would not back down from one pint-size minia, the last shred of the ancient dragon’s remaining pride.

“All are powerless. Know the truth, minia! Heroes, favored by fate, are not limited to the minia… There are those *just as powerful* among the wyverns!”

Harghent knew. Why hadn’t he realized it before? From the very start, as far as he knew, there should be only one singular creature capable of doing this to Vikeon.

He hadn’t realized it because…for the general who had slain close to a hundred wyvern flocks in his time, it was the name he loathed most of all.

“For example…the wyvern Hero—Alus the Star Runner.”

One creature had done all this? He had stolen the sight from one eye of this ancient dragon—a giant when compared to a wyvern—severed his left arm, pierced his flank, and caused the dragon’s tail to fester?

Unlike the minia, who couldn’t even hope to challenge the dragon without him being wounded and overwhelmed by numbers, a certain individual wyvern, surpassing all his fellow winged creatures, was able to do it?

“I have spoken of my humiliation…! Harghent the Still!”

“Th-the expedition…ends with me. After my army…no more soldiers from Aureatia will come trying to exterminate you. Everything came from my foolish judgment, based on personal utilitarian value. There, I’ve answered your first question, Vikeon the Smoldering.”

“Good. Then I shall feed your soul to the fire and forgive your minia folly.”

“I won’t let you. You can’t even imagine how many wings I have plucked from the heavens…! The skies above my head are quiet! I shall teach you the power of the Sixth General of Aureatia!”

Together with his Word Arts incantation, he brought melted steel material together. The material of the temporary operation headquarters was steel carried from Harghent’s homeland in Aureatia, and therefore, he was able to communicate with it to forge weapons with his Craft Arts.

His second name was Harghent the Still. The Craft Arts he prided himself on could create mounted mechanical bows, similar in size to a horse-drawn carriage. It was his ultimate antiair weapon—the Dragon Slayer ballista.

He understood that there was no telling if it would be enough to finish Vikeon without trying.

Nevertheless, for Harghent, betraying one’s own self was the ultimate evil.

The black dragon opened his maw.

“*Grah, grah, grah…* Weak. All is weak!”

The battle would be over in a single breath. Vikeon could change the mere act of exhaling into a powerful Thermal Arts breath that burned everything in its wake.

“—”

However, the evil dragon gulped back his exhalation.

He was looking behind the frail minia’s back to the ravine winding away behind him.

There, the crimson evening stretched out before him.

The edge of the horizon hosted the sunset and the scene of the swollen sun flickering in the lingering hot air.

He saw a shadow silhouetted by the final moments of the setting sun.

“Why did you come again? Why…?”

The lithe shadow was at the top of one of the summits of the ravine.

Without a word, it spread out its wings.

The ominous shadow was like the incarnation of folkloric demons and monsters.

Moreover…to the ancient dragon god Vikeon the Smoldering, this singular winged creature was…

“Star Runner.”

◆

The biggest difference between wyverns and dragons is their forelimbs—or lack thereof.

Dragons possessing two arms in addition to their wings meant their physical makeup had already surpassed other creatures significantly. But it could be argued that in this way, the wyverns, having lost their front arms and reducing their body mass over the generations, had recovered the true evolutionary path to improve their flight.

Additionally, similar to how the large reptiles of the Beyond replaced their bodies with avian forms, in this world, it was not the dragons but the wyverns who enjoyed prosperity.

Even while dragons were individually the strongest race of all, wyverns flew longer distances, energetically secured food, and adapted to their environment to reproduce.

In this manner, just as with the minia, the birth of an exceptional individual among their prosperous species was an inevitability.

The wyvern had three forelimb-like growths from birth.

In adolescence, they were thin and slender limbs—like a bug's—without any nerves running through them.

Reductive evolution was a curious thing.

Similar to the minia, who had diverged from their ancestors and begun walking on their hind legs, this wyvern naturally grew able to touch objects, manipulate them, and feel the tactile stimuli that resulted.

Therefore, he had been unable to tear off the meager organs, which only hindered his ability to fly and survive.

Eventually, his arms developed muscles and became able to grab and carry objects.

During the long time he'd spent handling weapons and tools, his arms acquired technical dexterity.

His arms longed for something new.

While the sun rose up high in the sky, that wyvern cast his flock aside and flew off from the seaside cliff where he had been born and raised.

His appetite, fostered by his arms, could no longer be sated within wyvern territory. Being the only one among his wyvern flock—closer in biology to birds, as the word *flock* suggests—to possess a developing intelligence, if anything, made him closer to dragons than his own race.

He possessed neither the appetite to survive to see tomorrow nor a desire to breed and pass on his seed.

He wanted to grasp yet-unknown things in his hands. He wanted to prove to himself that he was not a mere wyvern. With this coincidentally bestowed power, he wanted to attain extraordinary glory. That's how he wanted to live in the vast skies that stretched out before his wings. This was the vague appetite that spurred him.

Without a swarm of his own, this one wyvern, in spite of his slender frame, wanted it all.

Somewhere along the way, this tiny creature acquired one town's treasure.

He defeated an enemy. He conquered a dungeon. He subjugated a region.

And now he was…

◆

"Alus the Star Runner… Wh-what do you…? What more do you want…?!"

"……"

…striking fear into a legend.

"You have already stolen my treasure! You have already robbed me of my pride! What more is there to take from me?!"

"…What more…?"

Still perched on the stony summit, the wyvern cocked his slender neck to the side. He didn't seem to understand the question.

"I'm simply doing the obvious…"

There came a loud crack.

Alus only had to turn his body slightly to avoid the abruptly shot and colossally sized arrow.

"Star Runnerrrr!"

The deadly shot had come from Harghent the Still's Dragon Slayer ballista.

Incapable of successive shots, he nevertheless released the bolt not at Vikeon the Smoldering but toward the interloper.

"Y-you… Don't you dare interfere!"

"……"

In response to the man's voice, the wyvern simply lazily shook his head and took flight.

A sack was tied around his body, as if he were a minia traveler.

"Damn you… Damn you to hell, Star Runner…!"

As Harghent spouted resentful curses, Vikeon looked up at the sky. The wyvern had just taken off, but his silhouette was already disappearing. Vikeon couldn't follow him. Alus's speed far surpassed that of a normal wyvern.

The dragon attempted using his incendiary black smoke breath to intercept the champion.

In truth, his action was itself the answer to his attempt.

This black dragon was the same as the minia.

Tangled up in the valley floor…he could only conceal his body from the powerful enemy in the sky and try intercepting any attacks that came his way.

He had been forced to realize that should he take flight, he stood no chance against the wyvern. It had been physically carved into his body that, in these skies, there was another creature who ruled above him.

In the mind of Vikeon the Smoldering, he could no longer use his wings to fly.

“Go gipyaeis. Jyguegyuorg.” (Fly upon Tileet winds. Dry up the billowing moon!)

Vikeon mustered all his strength and unleashed his breath toward the shadow he caught in the corner of his eye.

He didn’t find his mark. Far too fast, the shadow flew around over his head.

Wyverns had evolved their capacity for flight beyond the abilities of dragons.

“I don’t believe it.”

This time, it was Harghent who expressed his astonishment.

Coming to a halt directly above Vikeon’s head, Alus the Star Runner gripped in his hand an inconceivable weapon for a wyvern.

An iron gun barrel. A wooden stock. He saw it for only a moment, but for someone like Harghent, who led rifle troops of his own, there was no mistaking it.

The wyvern held a piece of technology that had been brought to the world by the Visitors—known as a “musket.”

A wyvern, holding a rifle.

In the fleeting moment as the dragon switched to the defensive, a bullet flew.

“Hngggh… Graaaaah!”

There was a popping sound. It was not the sound of the gun but instead of the giant dragon’s flesh…as his remaining eye burst.

The muskets in this world had picked up improvements several generations in advance through Visitor-gifted knowledge and were more accurate and capable of rapid fire compared to counterparts that had existed in the Beyond.

However, even with that being the case, for someone in a three-dimensional high-speed aerial battle to cleanly pierce through the membrane that covered and protected a dragon’s eyes in one shot…

“……I’ll go ahead and tell you… The western cliff…poison bullets… from the Arboreal Sky Spire…,” Alus announced quietly as Vikeon’s anguished roar shook the air.

He was clearly boasting about this part of his collection.

“It’s processed from mandrake poison, you see…and starts affecting the nerves first…”

Relying on his voice, Vikeon still tried to aim his ire at Alus.

It was impossible to compete with the champion in the air. The damage to both eyes and his left arm had robbed Vikeon of combat options.

His only remaining advantage was his dragon breath, a skill impossible for the wyvern body to employ.

“Go gipyaeis—” (Fly upon Tileet winds—)

“Kylse ko khnmy. Kilwy kokko. Kukaei kyakhal. Konaue ko kastgraim.” (From Alus to the Nimi Pebble. Flowers bud. Part the husk and crack it. Trickling water. Pierce through.)

Ga-shunk.

Thin needles sprouted up from the dragon’s right eye.

The round object buried inside his socket instantly transformed, boring deeper into Vikeon’s brain.

Word Arts were transmitted according to one’s mental speed, and the incantations weren’t necessarily proportionally stronger the longer they were. Nevertheless, even with that being true…

The transfiguring Craft Arts came slightly faster than the dragon’s single breath.

“……It’s pointless, Vikeon. *I* shot that bullet, after all…”

“Gaaugh… Gah, graaaaaaaaaugh…!”

“You’re going to listen to me now. After all, I did the same thing with that spear sticking out of your side, right…?”

“Enough!” Harghent shouted while letting another arrow fly.

Once again, the shot was aimed toward Alus, but he avoided it with ease. A foolhardy attempt.

“That’s enough, Star Runner…! My mortal enemy! Why do you steal my quarry?! Y-you intend on saving the life of a man like me?!”

“…Harghent. You know…you ask some strange questions…”

The wyvern looked down at the dragon writhing in unbearable pain.

An evil dragon, a feared calamity, who had warded off minia expeditions against him for hundreds of years.

A single wyvern, deformed and slightly smaller in stature than an adult minia.

Finally, the sole reminder of his lost forces, the Sixth General of Aureatia.

It was plainly clear who was in control of the current situation and who among them would meet their end.

The one at the apex of this three-person food chain answered—

“Of course I’m going to try and save my friend…”

—with a reply Harghent had known for a long time.

He was right.

To the general who had slain hundreds upon hundreds of wyverns, his should have been the name he reviled above all others.

Alus the Star Runner.

Harghent loathed his existence more than any other. A being such as him should have never existed.

“I’m not your friend…! I’m an Aureatia general! The wyvern-slaying Wing Clipper Harghent! P-past or present, I’ll never give a damn about someone like you!”

The black dragon was dying. Harghent watched him slowly perish before his eyes, the dragon's muscles trembling, the strength draining from his wings.

It was almost the same death as a wyvern's, as if he shared the same lifeblood.

"…I see… You mean to become the king of soldiers, then… Good for you…"

Alus simply looked on, as drearily as usual, as the light faded from the old legend's eyes.

As if neither joy nor pleasure existed within the wyvern's heart.

"That's right…! To rise up the ranks, I killed hundreds of your brethren, too! Even at my age, I want for even more prestige! Which led me…to enact this foolish and hopeless expedition."

Killing a dragon should not have been possible. It was a childish dream from the start.

That day was not the first, either. Up until that point, many of his men and fellow citizens had died for the sake of his shortsighted dream.

He had earned the scorn of many. He had elevated himself to his lofty position at the cost of countless lives.

"…I know. That's why I respect you, Harghent…"

Alus rested his sack on the ground. All the treasures he had gathered during his travels around the world jangled within.

"I like to show these off…even to the ones I end up killing after…"

Stealing and collecting things was his true nature. Alus the Star Runner was no longer a wyvern and instead was closer to a dragon, greedily collecting treasure.

"A shield from the central mountain's briar marsh…a whip I picked up in Kidehay…I even have plenty of magic bullets…"

The many triumphs of Alus over the years had made their way to Harghent's ears as well.

As he was consumed by a terrible struggle for power, awkwardly clinging to his own authority while nothing ever went his way, he had heard rumors about the star-running wyvern's adventures in treasure collecting.

"……"

"…But I won't show them to you."

Harghent desired even more riches. Further heights of fame. A stabler life.

That wasn't really it, though. The only thing he wanted…

"After all, you're an impressive man, Harghent… If I show my hand, you'll gain the advantage…"

…was to best Alus, who was different from himself in every possible way.

Best the only person, different in race, who would affirm Harghent's ugly greed—his old friend.

"You're wrong. I…I haven't been able to get ahold of anything. For these past years, I've only…idly watched—"

“I heard. There’s some huge Imperial Competition in Aureatia… They’re all searching for the Hero, aren’t they…?”

With the three kingdoms joined, eventually some new form of government would try to emerge.

The monarch could no longer serve as the sole national icon to maintain control over the citizenry.

They were searching for the stalwart champion who had slain the True Demon King—they needed a Hero.

At the moment, most of the generals were working toward that goal. Being the one to bring forward the Hero meant becoming the patron sponsor of a new national icon.

Even if, for example, that *heroic individual* was of unknown origin.

“I should enter.”

…Yes, Harghent was certain that Alus would naturally usurp that honor.

This wyvern had traveled the world by himself, managing to seize everything he desired with his hands alone.

Harghent knew how many impregnable dungeons Alus had conquered.

He knew he had amassed rare and wondrous treasures from far and wide.

He knew he had bested enemies previously believed invulnerable.

Even having lost a majority of his troops, if Harghent could simply back Alus the Star Runner, who was sure to win the Imperial Competition…

“……Oh.”

Alus’s calm murmur made Harghent take notice.

“Gnngh… Graaaaah!”

It was the death throes of Vikeon the Smoldering, thought to be dead. The black breath that erupted from his gaping maw looked at that moment on the verge of drowning them both in blinding smoke.

“Alus, get away…!”

The breath passed over him. His vision was completely obscured. Harghent only managed to quickly warn Alus but was unable to push him out of the way. Unlike Peke.

However, the breath avoided Harghent.

“Great…and I just said I wouldn’t show you anything…”

In one of his hands, Alus held a small ornament that looked like a necklace. Making use of its mysterious functionality, Alus was able to divert the dragon’s searing breath.

It seemed to be some piece of supernatural equipment, like his magic bullets. The magic items in Alus’s bag were as numerous as the many legends he had conquered and looted. No one knew exactly how many mystical treasures and magical artifacts he had in total.

Relying only on the contents of his bag, he could employ any combination of tools and tricks to turn the tide of battle.

He was practically invincible.

“…Greatshield of the Dead.”

“*Groooaaah…!* Star Runneeerrr…!”

“…One more.”

Alus immediately vanished. Not even a flap of his wings could be seen in his high-speed flight.

Moving too fast even to leave a shadow behind, there came a blinding flash of light.

Fsshhhrrk. The horrifying noise of something burning persisted.

Harghent wondered if it had been a sword.

Supposing the non-minia wyvern had the technique to instantly unsheathe a sword in the blink of an eye. Supposing the sword itself had a grand blade of light, too grand to ever be sheathed. Supposing said sword of light cauterized the impenetrable scales of Vikeon the Smoldering and that it was possible for it to split the dragon in two, then yes, it was a sword.

“Hillensingen the Luminous Blade.”

The legendary dragon was cleanly bisected, nothing but two wasted chunks of burning flesh on the ground.

Harghent wanted to say he was incredible.

When he had first met Alus, in a town along the sea, he had been unable to even move his three arms.

He wanted to acknowledge the wyvern's shocking diligence, the sheer force of will required to accomplish what he had.

Nevertheless, this was the one thing Harghent could not do. As the years had worn on, and even now as everyone spoke in whispers about his bad reputation, he refused to admit defeat in front of Alus.

"……Alus."

"……"

"It's just as you said. I… No… Not only I, but every one of the ambitious Twenty-Nine Officials of Aureatia are searching for a Hero to one day support. They are trying to gather the strongest in the world together. If you're half as strong as you claim, then you should announce yourself as a candidate, too!"

"…Really now."

It appeared that Harghent's friend was already aware of his motives.

"N-nevertheless, I won't choose you. Have someone else choose you as their champion. I…"

"…Okay."

"I won't be able to seize any glory with your strength."

"Okay."

The wyvern's replies remained curt, and he turned his body toward the setting sun.

His voice was low, but there was a haughty edge to it.

"…To me, that hunger of yours is truly admirable… You have my respect… Someday, you'll become someone much more amazing than myself, Harghent."

Did he mean those words?

Could Harghent truly reach the same heights as the wyvern champion who endeavored to claim all this world had to offer?

Having lost everything, did he even have time to reach that peak?

"…Alus!"

The wyvern took flight, soon fading into the setting sun.

He was off to find a new object of pursuit. Perhaps he would fly to a whole new world.

And then one day, his conquests nearly at an end, he would claim the mantle of Hero.

"Where are you planning to go, Alus?"

"……The Great Nagan Labyrinth."

"That city is rubble. Why go there?"

"…I only ever have one thing on my mind. Conquest. There's something I want there…"

The sun over the Tileet Ravine began to sink below the horizon. Everything Harghent had lost was becoming blanketed in darkness.

Harghent thought about why Alus had left without parting words.

He had no regrets. At the very least, he certainly didn't regret watching Alus depart into the sky.

…Because he believed in his own definition of evil.

Evil is when you betray your own beliefs.

He could wield any type of weapon under the sky with his supernatural aptitude.

He possessed a vast array of superpowered magical items, gathered together from all corners of the world.

He challenged an endless succession of opponents and dungeons and came out on top every time.

He was the fastest living creature in the sky, his hunger driving his conquests even into the domain of dragons.

He was the rogue wyvern…

…Alus the Star Runner.

CHAPTER 5 Dakai the Magpie

The Duchy of Lithia was a major metropolis even prior to its independence, built along the wide banks of a pristine canal. Among the historic city architecture rose brand-new, pure-white spires, which served as the symbol of the current Lithia, transformed into the New Principality.

Just past noon, a pleasant breeze blew across the canal.

“Master Taren!”

Hearing the child call after her, Taren the Punished stopped in her tracks.

The ruler of the New Principality had wrapped up the day’s assembly and was on her way to her office in the central stronghold. The city’s opposition to Aureatia and its political situation meant very little to many children living in the town.

The heroic woman, nearly in her fifties, bent down and locked eyes with the young boy in front of her, no more than eight or nine years old.

“What’s the matter, boy? Sorry to say, but you won’t get any candy out of me.”

“Um, well, Dad told me that we owe you a whole lot…and that we’ve had more customers, and I wanted to thank you.”

“Hmph. I see. But I’m not doing things to help your father out.”

Taren knew her cold and stern eyes frightened people the first time they saw her. To account for this, Taren gave the boy a gentle pat on the head. The child’s eyes squinted with glee.

“It’s my job to create policies that serve the economic benefit of Lithia’s people. Nothing would have changed without your father’s labor and dedication. If you want to give thanks, offer it to him.”

“But, um…at the children’s council, we learned handicrafts. I made something for you.”

“For me, eh?”

The boy stretched out his hands, holding a clumsily made wooden bowl. Unlike something created with a professional’s Craft Arts, its nails and seams were exposed, and it looked difficult to actually use.

Taren found it pleasing.

“A perfect place to keep my hair clips. I’ll use it with care. Take your studies to heart, boy. Become a good Lithia citizen, like your father.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Taren the Punished was a seasoned military officer, formerly given the title of Twenty-Third General among the Twenty-Nine Officials of Aureatia.

With her talent in martial, intellectual, and political pursuits, she proclaimed her region’s independence just as the True Demon King was defeated. Despite being recognized as a self-proclaimed Demon King, she

used her thoroughly laid groundwork during her time as the Twenty-Third General and the geographical importance of the region as weapons to maintain friendly relations with Aureatia from the waterfront.

The land had always been rich with resources. The various rights they had won along with their independence and their freedom from their tax obligations to central Aureatia meant a substantial boost in quality of life for the Lithia citizenry—at least, for the time being.

A unified nation rather than three separate kingdoms. Resistance to this proposal is to be expected, I suppose.

Aureatia's answer to the developments in Lithia was clear as day. Taren assumed there was someone behind the scenes, pulling the strings during the days of unrelenting raider attacks against the merchant caravans coming and going from the city. It worked to restrict the flow of resources in and out of the New Principality—Aureatia's silent economic sanctions.

War with Aureatia would come eventually. Thus, she needed to act with haste to ensure their chance of victory didn't slip away. While officially working to negotiate with Aureatia, her preparations proceeded apace.

Taren's shoes echoed harshly on the floors of the central stronghold before arriving at her empty office. There, she opened her mouth and said, "Dakai… You're back, aren't you?"

"C'mon…"

A lone young man silently dropped down from the ceiling crossbeam. Though he appeared to be a minia, his agility rivaled that of a wolf.

His long hair, uniquely dyed at the tips, fluttered down shortly after him. Until then, there had been no hint of his presence, not a single breath. Even Lithia's most elite soldiers would have been unable to spot him.

"How'd you know I was there?!"

"Lucky guess."

Taren removed her two-handed sword from her waist and reclined in her chair. Despite the smile that found its way to her face, her piercing gaze was unwavering.

"Those are the first words I say whenever I return to the office. Judging by that reaction of yours, I'd say it was worth it, wouldn't you?"

"Sheesh, you're something else, Taren, I'll give you that."

"We've known each other a long time. I've simply come to understand your preferred methods of playing tricks on me. You've retrieved what I requested from Nagan, then?"

"I wouldn't be back if I hadn't."

Despite wearing a fully formal outfit, similar in style to a butler's, the young man wore no shoes. He was completely barefoot.

Rudely sitting down on top of one of the desks, he tossed something Taren's way. Big enough to fit in two hands, the item, with its built-in crystal lens, served an unknown purpose.

"This is what you wanted, right?"

"…Undoubtedly. It fits the records' description of the *Cold Star* perfectly. Your resourcefulness is second to none, Dakai."

Personnel wasn't all the New Principality was after. They required weapons like this one, as well.

While Lana the Moon Tempest's recon unit scoured the land for elite soldiers, Dakai the Magpie was tasked with hunting down these sorts of abnormal magic items, enchanted swords and tools that had yet to be scooped up in the arms of Alus the Star Runner. Weapons that would have tremendous influence over the anticipated war, outshining even the powers of Word Arts.

"So what kind of nasty business is this thing, then?"

"A magic item from records far before the age of the True Demon King. Light from the sun that's passed through the central crystal and built up over years…gets converted to an explosive beam capable of bombarding an entire city. I saw that the self-proclaimed Demon King Kiyazuna used it as one of the power sources for the Great Labyrinth, and it looks like I was right on the money."

"*Ha-ha.* Frightening stuff."

"Indeed. Nothing cast out from the Beyond is ever gentle. Magic items and enchanted swords. Intolerable to the Beyond, these perverse oddities all flow into our world. The only explanation is that this is the purpose for which our world was created."

"……Hey now. Is that a dig at me?"

"Nonsense. Surely you don't think of yourself as gentle?"

The sword strapped to Dakai's waist, a thick-bladed scimitar, similar in shape to the *liyuedao* sabers of the Beyond, was one such supernatural magic item called the Magicked Blade of Razhucort.

It was an enchanted sword that possessed the ability to see through every attack and respond with blinding cutting speed, always taking the initiative against its foes.

"What about the other magic items besides the Cold Star? Did you have time to check if they were there or not?"

"Yep. But your suspicion proved right on the money. Alus the Star Runner made off with most of them. If only I had started working on this a bit faster, I probably could've taken him on."

"At the very least, as long as I have the Cold Star, we can consider the matter dealt with. No need to act outside my words."

"Oh? You sure I shouldn't have brought that Dungeon Golem back with me? That was my first time seeing it, but…that self-proclaimed demon lot sure made some crazy stuff."

"……Indeed."

Taren had also heard about what happened to Nagan City—that the Great Labyrinth had come to life as a golem and razed the entire settlement. It was an unprecedented situation. Ever since hearing the

report from her subordinates, she had assumed it had something to do with the grave-robbing mission to extract the Cold Star.

“I heard that the Dungeon Golem got put down the same day it came to life. I assumed you were the one who defeated it.”

“Did you, now? Well, there are others besides me who could’ve taken it down. Somewhere out there, I’m sure…”

Dakai then lightly tapped on his right shoulder.

“Its core was located right around here—am I right?”

“I haven’t heard any of the details. Aureatia ended up securing the remains, too.”

Nevertheless, Taren was sure there was no mistaking guesses from a man like Dakai the Magpie.

Her previous praise had not been flattery. This thin young man, easily mistaken for a woman at first glance, was a warrior capable of going toe to toe with virtually any foe, even the self-proclaimed Demon King Kiyazuna’s Dungeon Golem.

“If that sword of yours had cut down the Dungeon Golem, I would’ve loved to witness it.”

“Don’t get your hopes up. I’m no swordsman.”

“Exactly. Now, given that you’ve managed to obtain this magic item, I can put you in charge of another job without worry.”

Taren folded her hands together over her desk.

“For the past two months now, caravans traveling in and out of Lithia have been getting attacked. Most likely raiders under Aureatia’s direction.”

“I’ve heard. However, Regnejee’s protecting the skies over Lithia, right? Bandits traveling by land aren’t anything to be concerned about in the first place.”

“Of course…if their movements were limited to the area around Lithia. However, a wyvern army can do nothing when goods are being plundered from towns along the way to Lithia. We have suffered losses, few though they may be. On top of that, there lies another problem with the thieves infesting the countryside around Lithia.”

“Hmmmm. And what is this difficult problem, then?”

“Our enemy is using these thieves to get an idea of how *consistent we are at dealing with them*. They’re watching for the times when our wyverns don’t sortie as quickly. They’re taking note of the high-demand goods that the wyverns immediately set out to secure and defend. As long as these raids keep happening, we’ll be feeding this intel straight to the enemy.”

“Basically—”

Still perched on the desk, ignoring all etiquette and courtesy, Dakai swung his feet.

“You’re saying there’s someone in charge of leaking what goods are coming in and when there are communication delays?”

“I knew you’d catch on quickly. It’s safe to assume there’s an informant conspiring with Aureatia.”

Dakai the Magpie was no general. He couldn't hold a candle to Taren when it came to tactical and military strategy, given her years of martial experience. Nevertheless, when compared with Taren or the wyvern troop commander Regnejee, he was a terrifying demon of a man.

He had quick wits, which allowed him to read his opponents' movements and react quickly. He had traversed the Great Labyrinth that had stumped the Nagan adventurers for twenty years and stolen the treasure from deep within…after which he had slipped through the resulting hellscape of fire and golem destruction as easily as a normal walk home. To him, it was so simple, it wasn't even worth mentioning.

"Smoke out the informant and capture them. If it looks like you'll need to cut down anyone who gets in your way, just go ahead and make the judgment call. You can handle that, right?"

"Sheesh, enough talk of killing…"

The young man chuckled, tracing his enchanted sword with his fingertips.

"What did I just say? I'm no swordsman."

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Later that same afternoon, on a backstreet.

"Hey, guys, got a second?"

Dakai called out, stopping three peddlers… His eyes could discern the cover the men were going for.

Though the evening bustle from the main street was vaguely audible, there were very few denizens of the city who purposefully visited the back alleys along the canal. The dark windows of the abandoned city buildings loomed over the men in the alley.

"What will it be, then? If you're looking for smoked meat, well—"

"These raiders appeared right outside the city, see," Dakai began, wiping away the merchant's fake smile. Keeping a hand in his pocket, he didn't even look the men in the eyes.

"To send in spies, maybe? They hopped on the caravan in the melee and managed to make their way inside Lithia… On its face, looked like one of the other merchant carriages that got attacked. Finding a hole in the air defenses wasn't the only objective here, right?"

"……"

"…Yup. But if you're supposed to be peddlers here, then this isn't all of you, is it? Even knowing there's more of you, there's gotta be someone under different orders looking into the chain of command…"

Dakai brought his hand up to his chin and nodded to himself. With this, he had finished observing their reactions.

On the side of the alley, the Aureatia spies in disguise had all lost their deceptive smiles. It was clear they needed to dispose of the young man before them. The spy in front crouched down and brandished his dagger.

This misdirection did nothing to faze Dakai the Magpie—then came a gunshot.

"Whoa there."

The Magicked Blade of Razhucort traced the bullet and deflected it away.

The shot had come from one of the windows of the supposedly deserted old city. There were four barrels trained on Dakai. He assessed the situation. There were another three assailants waiting in ambush inside the buildings.

His eyes moved at lightning speed. Leaping into the air, there were two new bullet holes gouged into the ground where he had just been standing. On the street, the three men gripped covert foldable spears and lunged at Dakai.

Not many people came to the back alleys along the canal. The palisade at one end of the alley meant the area was ideal for sniping enemies and making sure they didn't get away. On top of that, the spies had their numbers and their weapons. They didn't need to worry about getting discovered by the wyvern soldiers, either.

This is one of their covert bases of operations. Their own little stronghold, eh? My guess was right on the money.

The soldiers disguised as peddlers closed the distance. With an overwhelming range advantage, they thrust their spears toward Dakai all at once. By that moment, Dakai had already leaped upside down into the air. The enchanted sword's tip sliced off one of the spearheads in a blur, sending it flying.

In the time it would take a normal person to breathe, Dakai's train of thought raced in sync with his movements.

The fact that the wyvern troops didn't spot these guys before I seriously started looking means these aren't just some half-assed mercenaries. These are honest-to-goodness Aureatia intelligence agents. Which then means they must be planning to start the war soon—

A metallic *clang* resounded.

While Dakai's body hung in midair, the second volley of gunfire pierced the sky. The bullets met with the broad-width blade of Dakai's enchanted sword. The maneuver protected his midsection. He gave a friendly chuckle.

"Nice aim."

As he descended, the tips of his toes flashed brightly. He wasn't wearing shoes. He used his toes to snatch up the twirling spearhead he had just sent flying. The third spear wielder below had his throat pierced by a near-instant whirling kick and died on the spot.

Dakai landed. There came a gunshot. The bullet still missed its mark. He used the body of the man he had just killed as a shield.

The corpse's knees buckled, and before the dead man could slump to the ground, Dakai's naked heel dug into the agent's shoulder. Dakai flew into the air. Landing on the rather narrow top of the canal palisade and grabbing on with his toes, Dakai looked toward the opposite end of the canal where the sniper shots were coming from.

"Four."

He counted the gunshots that echoed across the canal. Four barrels were visible from outside the residential windows.

The dramatic bloodbath was over in an instant, before the snipers even had a chance to reload.

Still perched atop the palisade, Dakai threw a weapon—not his enchanted sword but the spear from the freshly killed soldier. Hurled with incredible, Herculean strength, the spear pierced straight through the face of the faster-reloading sniper, killing him.

Dakai the Magpie jumped. A rupturing concussion resounded as the canal palisade was crushed under the recoil from Dakai's legs kicking up into the air. Crossing over the length of the canal, wide enough for two warships to pass by each other, his speed had him trace a nearly parallel line across the water's surface. Even his shadow reflected on the canal's waters for only a mere instant.

Grabbing the first-floor window frame with his free hand, Dakai used his finger strength to launch himself up and into a third-floor window. Inside, he sliced the gun-wielding soldier to pieces, turning their body into a scattered spray of blood.

Dakai the Magpie was a minia. Definitely neither ogre nor gigant, despite how preposterous and abnormal his physical abilities were.

"All right. That leaves…one, two…and those three. Five, then."

As he counted the remaining adversaries on his fingers, he sliced up the spy on the communications device deeper with his enchanted sword without even looking. The agent's head had been severed with such extreme speed that it crashed into the clay wall, the force causing it to burst open like rotten fruit.

"Four left."

He returned to the window he had just flown through, suddenly realizing something.

Dropping from the third window like it was a slight dip along the road, he split the head of the person right below him clean in two. Spies tried to escape from the first-floor entrance, having been alerted to Dakai's infiltration.

In his hands, Dakai twirled his enchanted sword around. Covered in his victims' blood, he gave another friendly smile.

"Okay, so you and you… That's two. Just one left, then."

He could see everything with precision—like he was passing thread through the eye of a needle—both the retreat of his enemies and where he would land after his fall.

Two of the soldiers trying to flee were blocked off from the exit. It was now abundantly clear to all bearing witness: An Aureatia spy group, capable of infiltrating the New Principality and avoiding the eyes of the wyvern troops patrolling the region, had been completely wiped out from what had clearly been an advantageous position.

At the hands of a single young man.

“I can kill you guys, too, but what’ll it be?”

“…We surrender. Eeko, throw away your weapon, too.”

“But, sir, if we’re captured by the New Principality, who knows how they’ll treat us?”

“You’re no match for this swordsman! This guy’s—”

Before the senior soldier could finish speaking, his severed head sailed into the air.

“Ah, sorry. I had it all wrong.”

“E-eep…”

“Begging for your lives was to buy time for the one left over inside to get away, right? I know all about that stuff.”

Dakai took out a bundle of parchment from his coat pocket and showed it to the remaining spy.

“Also, to be honest, there’s no reason to throw your life away just to let that guy escape. All the records are written down right here, aren’t they?”

Due to this world’s low literacy rate, trained spies left ciphered records behind in their own unique code. The papers in Dakai’s hand had been pinched from the soldiers he had dispatched.

This young man possessed the skill to perform impressive sleights of hand while simultaneously eliminating his enemies at blinding speed.

“I—I give up! Please, swordsman, have mercy! D-don’t kill m—”

“Save your breath.”

The young soldier’s body split into five pieces as Dakai walked past him.

“See…I’m not a swordsman. I’m a bandit.”

For these sorts of spy cells, no matter how many of them died, their home country would never acknowledge their existence. Thus, Dakai’s slaughter, too, was nothing more than another chance for them to observe how *their enemies responded* to such situations.

“Let’s see, then. Now what’ll you do, Aureatia?”

Factoring in his brutality and carnage, he could never follow the warriors’ path. His magicked blade and appetite for violence were little more than the tools of his trade, means to an end.

In the world of the Beyond, their intolerable anomalies were transported to this world.

Dakai the Magpie was a Visitor.

He saw the world through aberrant eyes, capable of watching a bullet move in slow motion.

He boasted an insightful resourcefulness, capable of exposing schemes and conquering impenetrable labyrinths on his own.

He possessed swift and precise fingertips, dexterous enough to plunder at speeds impossible for anyone to combat.

An extravagant and lawless pilferer above all, surpassing the boundary between worlds.

He was a bandit. And a minia.

Dakai the Magpie.

CHAPTER 6 Regnejee the Wings of Sunset

Around the time the lamplighter was beginning to snuff out the night lamps along the main streets, a ray of light began reclaiming the bottomless darkness covering the pure canal waters surrounding Lithia.

At this hour, there was a group touching down in a plaza on the outskirts of the city. It was the flock of wyverns under Regnejee's command. A fantastic and non-minia army, both feared and relied on by the citizens of the city.

"Attention, all troops. Eyes on me!"

Having landed on the tallest lantern in the area, Regnejee craned his neck from side to side restlessly, more to ensure no minia could hear his voice than to confirm that his entire force was present.

"Now then. We're here to expunge the filth."

Even among others of his race, he was a high-strung and delicate wyvern. With wyvern flocks generally revering strength and boldness above all, this sort of wyvern would normally never hold sway over his kin.

"There was a missing person in Lithia today. A minia child. A nine-year-old girl. That ring a bell to any of you?"

"I have something to report!" a shrill voice replied from a corner of the flock.

"Vice Captain of the Southern Column Lukwel…a-ate and killed the child, *raak*! I—I witnessed it myself, I report!"

"……"

In the silence, Regnejee looked at a large wyvern in the corner of the plaza. The eyes of the troops gathered on the same location.

"…We are provided sufficient provisions for our work as guardians of Lithia. As compensation! I'll say it so that even the fools among you will understand! Eating Lithia citizens! Damaging Taren the Punished's trust! High treason! These are the things that will lead to this whole swarm's starvation! Vice Captain of the Southern Column Lukwel, if you have anything to say for yourself, you'd better say it now!"

"Krrrnnn…"

The vice captain crooned indistinctly while slowly blinking. Peculiarly, some number of the wyverns had the same suspicious look about them. Although intelligence level varied from wyvern to wyvern, there was a bizarre atmosphere among Regnejee's troops.

"Krrrnnn…… Mrrr…"

"Kekxy ko khart. Kent kakor. Kokett korp." (From Regnejee to Lithia winds. Return mirror plate. Encumbered sun.)

Without a single word of warning, Regnejee began incanting Word Arts. An unseen fear circulated through the wyverns. Their leader's spell signaled an execution.

"Kokaitok!" (Shine!)

"Krwaaaah!"

A conical red light appeared in the empty air and burned the wyvern from three directions at once.

The one scalded was not Vice Captain Lukwel, however, but instead the wyvern informant who'd first accused the vice captain.

"—!"

Before the informant could even spit in contempt, Regnejee grabbed them in his claws and pushed them down to the ground.

"Did you think to mislead my own investigation?! Scum! Traitorous scum!"

The moment the light from the Thermal Arts touched the wyvern, their skin was seared, cooking the inner flesh, when—

"*Aah…* Look! All of you look! Bear witness to the end of this fool who betrayed us!"

Regnejee's claws mercilessly rent the informant's stomach.

The reason this peculiar wyvern, with his unimpressive build, had gained control of the flock was not solely due to his inherent intelligence and proficiency for Word Arts to overpower others.

"Scum who eat Lithia citizens… People eaters are punished by death! No exceptions! Capital punishment! Execution!"

A chunk of bloody meat, torn out from the living wyvern's stomach, was raised into the air. It was the half-digested arm of a child.

Regnejee's eyes glared through his clouded nictitating membrane at the speechless flock.

Then, suddenly, there came a disquieting noise of wingbeats.

One thing was certain. These wings did not belong to any of the wyverns.

"One year…this filth was added to our swarm one year ago! Not enough *treatment*! All the others who joined at the same time will undergo *treatment again*! No more cracks in discipline! Never again!"

Within Regnejee lurked a harshness that bordered on insanity. A reign of terror that accompanied very little tolerance for insubordination. That was the real power that elevated Regnejee the Wings of Sunset to his position at the top.

This historic symbiosis between people and wyverns was also a tenuous peace, dancing on thin ice and barely supported by the existence of a prodigy like Regnejee.

It's my duty, Regnejee thought, his claws still soaked in cooling blood.

The minia girl the executed wyvern soldier had eaten would be treated as a runaway. Two people a month. That category of sacrifice would likely be fine with Taren. However, if these sacrifices increased, Regnejee

couldn’t guarantee the wyverns’ futures. It was necessary for him to maintain control.

To preserve the swarm. And for the only thing he valued in the world.

He knew it was not a crime for wyverns to eat people. Wyverns had no concept of crime to begin with. Their nature was to be free, their wings tools for them to forcefully devour and plunder anything and everything their hearts desired.

Even if it went against divine natural providence and no matter what hideous methods he needed to employ, it was his duty to make sure his flock lived on and survived.

…I will guide the rabble. I will never desert the swarm. The truly powerful are the ones to lead. The ones to bear responsibility for the most lives.

There were times Regnejee would remember the scenery of the sea bluffs, when the sun was at its zenith.

The memory was from shortly before the True Demon King came and took everything away from him.

To Regnejee, his fellow wyverns were nothing more than foolish riffraff.

However, there was one other wyvern like him, possessing intelligence and the capacity to lead.

He recalled that wyvern’s shadow, flying far off beyond the clouds. Regnejee must have had the same choice available to him, too.

One abandoned the peace and order of the swarm, wishing to be free.

One earned authority and shouldered responsibility for the lives of the swarm.

Born equipped with an intelligence unlike the others, Regnejee was the one who hadn’t been able to abandon those wyverns who had remained behind, comrades destined to one day be subjugated by the minia. Even though these wyvern fools were hard to save, even if the entire world was to be brought to ruin by the Demon King’s terror…and even if it meant abandoning their natural wyvern freedoms in service to the minia, Regnejee had no intentions of abandoning his swarm.

He believed it was the correct choice.

No matter how strong a wyvern was, attempting to survive without the solidarity of one’s flock was the height of foolishness.

Nevertheless, that lone wyvern had flapped his wings and left them all behind.

◆

Compared with other cityscapes, what greatly distinguished the scenery of the New Principality of Lithia were the white spires that rose up like a forest. Each one served as a large residence for the wyverns who protected the city and as eyes that continuously looked down from the skies on the citizens and outside threats against the city.

However, within the spire directly connected to the central stronghold, there was a room prepared solely for a single minia.

The room was always kept tidy, filled with expensive furniture, and subdued sunlight shone over the white walls. Living there on her own was a young girl of nineteen years old.

“Today was sunny. Regnejee left early in the morning…”

She muttered into the book that lay open on her desk. Her lightly colored hair stretched down to her feet, suggesting she didn’t spend much time outside her room.

“What are you mumbling about?”

The voice came from the window. She shifted in its direction.

“…Regnejee?” she asked, turning her face to the window. Even with her eyelids open, the girl saw nothing. Her irises were clouded over with gray.

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“Did you sortie today, too?”

“Just finished driving off a group of raider scum. I’m not playing all day every day, unlike you.”

“I was writing in a journal. Nobles who can write apparently jot down records in these books every day… If I do the same thing, then I’ll be able to remember my conversations with you forever.”

“Hmph. Don’t be so foolish. You can’t even see; how exactly are you supposed to write?”

“*Hee-hee-hee.* I’ve been having fun with this recently.”

Her name was Curte of the Fair Skies. Her relationship with the king of the skies and protector of Lithia, Regnejee the Wings of Sunset, extended back to before the New Principality had declared independence.

“It’s still light outside, right?”

As Curte approached the window, her long hair flowed in the wind blowing into the room. She casually stretched out a hand to try and touch Regnejee beside her.

He immediately pulled back his wing, and Curte’s fingers grasped at the air.

“Aw.”

“Don’t touch me.”

“*Tee-hee.* I guess even a surprise attack won’t do the trick, huh?”

“Weakling. Small fry like you won’t ever come close, even if you spend your whole life trying.”

“You may be right. I have to think up some other method, then.”

The open window looked down on the beautiful cityscape of Lithia.

A colossal blue belfry rose up among the rows of spires. Radiating out in all directions were the low, gray city streets. The blue of the sky and canal, a faint and gentle border, brought moisture to the air.

“…Do you like Lithia, Regnejee?”

“How about you? Not that you can see anything anyway.”

“I like it. It’s very pretty.”

“Damn fool. If only I had it so easy.”

Curte smiled. Regnejee’s words were always vitriolic and spiteful.

However, the spectacle he had given the girl was not the cruel scenes of the wyvern fighting on the battlefield but instead the glorious and beautiful world visible only to the creatures that soared through the sky.

“…Aren’t you going to sing today, Curte?”

“If a song is what you want, you’ll find many singers far better than myself.”

“I don’t care about the song…really…,” Regnejee replied, quietly squatting down on the floor. “……I want to hear your song.”

To Regnejee and his fierce temperament, fierce even among the minia-eating wyverns, this was the only time he felt at peace.

“—. —, —”

Looking down on the city she couldn’t see, Curte began singing with her delicate yet resonant voice.

The song was without lyrics, weaving only a melody.

—The girl, her vision lost, would still sometimes see waking nightmares of darkness.

The day the True Demon King arrived and her birthplace along the sea was devoured in terror and madness.

Curte hadn’t even directly seen who the True Demon King was or what they had done to her hometown. Even now that everything was over, there was no one anywhere who knew the actual form of the True Demon King.

A *passing visit* from the True Demon King had plunged her home village into irrevocable annihilation.

It might have actually been her destiny that day for Curte, as well, losing the light in her eyes from the indescribable act of violence, to linger eternally on the border of madness.

“…Ahhh. A lovely song,” Regnejee quietly murmured.

That day, she was the only person—with Regnejee as the only wyvern—who didn’t stay lost to the madness.

She remembered being able to hear a song from somewhere, amid the eternally sealed darkness. Even if it was a mere auditory hallucination moments before death, she still had heard it. The angels’ songs spoken of in the old teachings surely must have sounded similar. She remembered it was without lyrics, only a melody.

Regnejee believed that song, unsure whether it really existed or not, had brought Curte’s consciousness back to this world.

“Hey, Regnejee…what is going to happen to Lithia?”

The wyvern’s sorties were growing more frequent. Even with no knowledge of politics or government, Curte could feel a vague foreboding seeping into Lithia.

The lord of the seaside nest, Curte’s homeland, Regnejee was a wyvern who had also been wrapped up in the True Demon King calamity. At the time, save for Regnejee himself and some other wyverns who happened to

be away, his first flock, which he had spent his long life cultivating, had been completely devastated by the True Demon King, as if they were nothing but a swarm of insects.

Even if they differed physically, both Regnejee and Curte shared signs in their pasts of the worlds they had lived in beginning to collapse.

They still did not know if the current daily decay would continue in waves of triumph and upheaval or if they were on the path to ruin. Nevertheless, they knew the current tranquil days would inevitably change completely.

"What about you, Curte? Planning on living on here in Lithia?"

"*Hee-hee.* My mom's the ruler, after all."

"…People die. War will start soon. I'm serious. I can tell."

Curte knew Regnejee's words of warning were true. He had much deeper knowledge than she did regarding military tactics and strategy, and she believed his premotions to be even more reliable than those of a general for the minia races.

Regnejee didn't lie to Curte.

The fighting was sure to break out at any minute. And their enemy would be Aureatia, the world's largest nation.

"Even if it does, I'm not leaving you behind, Regnejee."

"Hmph. If war does break out, scum like you will be the first to die."

Thin fingers tried to touch Regnejee's wing. Regnejee avoided them without even a glance in the girl's direction.

"Awww."

"Try all you like, it'll always end the same way, you dunce."

"C'mon, just let me have a little touch."

Curte's fingers once again cut through the air.

"Kn-knock it off, stupid! You're going to fall!"

"Tee-hee, hee-hee-hee."

"It's dangerous, even for a dunce like you!"

His shrill voice made it clear he was not a minia.

Nevertheless, being blind, Curte had never seen Regnejee's true form before.

Thus, she was unaware that he was a genius who commanded a wyvern swarm; who erected this world's air-defense network, utilizing air reconnaissance and radzio communication; and who eliminated and devoured anyone who stood as an enemy to Curte.

Her family and her friends were all dead. Right now, her sole parent was Taren the Punished, who had taken in the orphan girl together with Regnejee.

"Is it okay if I sing again?"

"…I don't care. Do as you please."

In the corner of the room, Regnejee silently curled up into a ball.

Until Curte finished singing again…quietly and in peace.

He was ever at the side of Curte of the Fair Skies. Together with his wyvern wings, allowing him to sail on the winds as far as he pleased, and with his outstanding intellect, surpassing any other member of his race.

“Hey, Regnejee, did you know? At the beginning of this world…there were angels, and together with the Word-Maker, they created everything…”

She believed this legend. Even if she couldn’t see his face and even though he wasn’t a minia, he was still a friend she could believe in from the bottom of her heart.

“Angels like songs…because the Word Arts began with a song.”

Curte smiled. She truly felt that way about Regnejee, who continued to look after her without expecting anything in return, sitting by the blind girl’s side.

“If only you were an angel, Regnejee.”

The Word Arts of this world made it possible for all races to communicate effortlessly.

He held the world’s sole flying army to do with as he pleased and controlled the wide-open skies.

He led a completely obedient colony of wyverns willing even to die if he bade them do so. It lived as if it were one singular organism.

He had the intellect to fully control the tide of battle and spread his roots deep into the core of a nation-state.

A fierce attacker as well as a guardian of order. Above all, a unique calamity among the clouds.

A wyvern commander unlike any before him.

Regnejee the Wings of Sunset.

CHAPTER 7 The Central Detention Hold

Even among the numerous prisons scattered around Aureatia, the facility was intentionally built in an area that housed many military buildings, subject to constant and strict surveillance. The individuals imprisoned in its walls were mainly limited to major war criminals and prisoners who normal soldiers could handle—*low-risk* prisoners.

The man walking down the road to the prison wore his hat at an angle—the Twentieth Minister of Aureatia, Hidow the Clamp.

The young official turned around at the sound of a soldier's footsteps approaching behind him.

"Lord Hidow. We've received word from the headquarters in Mage City."

"Great. So I've been given jurisdiction over this New Principality problem now?"

Hidow scratched an ear, a look of annoyed reluctance on his face.

"Yes. There was a notice from the Third Minister this morning."

"Jelki's doing, is it? Never wastes a damn moment, does he…? Well, what is it, then?"

"Periodic reports from our eight intelligence officers all stopped at once. As of yesterday, all in less than a day."

"Their base of operations got surrounded, and they got wiped out, then? None of them managed to escape?"

"That's right. Among the eight, not a single one survived. They were all elite officers, handpicked by the Seventeenth Minister herself. They must've been up against a considerably large force."

"I wonder. How many men do you think you'd need to take out eight of her spies?"

Hidow kept his hands in his pockets as he walked. The footsteps of himself and the soldier were the only things that echoed through the underground passage.

"The fact that they were driven to annihilation alone means at least one squad of four. That said, with the Seventeenth Minister's spies, they always make sure one person escapes, even if they have to sacrifice everyone else to do it. To completely wipe them all out, you would need four squads, sixteen total. One of those would have to be a sniper unit."

"They were the Seventeenth Minister's troops, after all."

Hidow the Clamp's views more or less aligned with the soldier's assessment. To take out an entire group of well-trained Aureatia spies would require that amount of manpower at the very least.

"…Has little Elea been told about this?"

"Little Elea?"

“The Seventeenth Minister. Elea the Red Tag. Reporting about this to the spy boss should take priority over me, right? Though I have heard she’s currently busy with a separate infiltration mission.”

“…Indeed. She appears to be out in a part of the frontier where radzio communication is difficult, so I first thought to inform you, Lord Hidow, as the person in charge.”

“Person in charge? Hey now, I haven’t even gotten an official letter of appointment yet.”

The Seventeenth Minister of Aureatia, Elea the Red Tag, had, for six small months now, been busy with an investigation a far distance from Aureatia. The wyvern expert, Sixth General Harghent, was infatuated with his dragon-slaying mission, and due to the extreme secrecy of the head of the intelligence, the Seventeenth Minister Elea, even emergency communications weren’t reaching her.

“Sheesh, damn near everyone and anyone’s off gallivanting, doing whatever they want…”

“Naturally, I believe the command jurisdiction over the spy troops has been transferred to yourself. Shall we have more personnel infiltrate the city?”

“They’d die in vain if things played out the same way… Time for another strategy.”

Hidow closed his eyes. The topography of the future battlefield, engraved in his mind countless times over, floated into his thoughts.

“…On the eastern side of the operation headquarters, there should be a basin carved out by the mountain stream. Per our negotiations with the New Principality, it should be just barely within our territory. Build a battle encampment there.”

“A basin… Yes, there is indeed one there, but it is quite far away from the headquarters. I don’t believe that position would serve much purpose defensively.”

“That’s fine. It’ll be an offensive forward position. The complicated topography will deceive the eyes of their wyverns. Sometime tomorrow, I’ll send a few skilled fortification experts over.”

“Understood… Incidentally, sir…”

The two had stopped walking. They had arrived at their destination, in front of one of the prison’s cells.

The corridor was always brightly lit, but the air was horribly still.

“…the release of the Vortical Stampede… Well, um, is that your responsibility, sir?”

“Yup. Move aside for a second.”

Hidow tapped on the iron door. Leaning on it with his balled-up fist, he called out to the person inside.

“You’re awake in there, aren’t you, Nihilo?”

Hidow could see the prisoner inside move off the bed.

One eye, left uncovered by the prisoner's long bangs, looked toward the door, and the prisoner smiled. A very young girl.

"…It's okay. I just woke up."

Threadlike antennae extending out from her spine wriggled in complex patterns. The girl was not a minia.

"Apparently, eight intelligence agents in the New Principality got wiped out in a single day. How many people would you need to do that, Nihilo the Vortical Stampede?"

"Just one."

After her flat reply, the answer obvious, she giggled.

"Actually, no. One person and *one body*, I should say."

She was called Nihilo the Vortical Stampede.

The individuals imprisoned in this facility were primarily limited to major war criminals and prisoners who normal soldiers could handle—*low-risk* prisoners.

However, Nihilo was the most terrible living weapon on existing record, who in a past war had wiped out an entire Aureatia army single-handedly.

CHAPTER 8 Kia the World Word

Unfastening her sash, she felt her heavy robe, wet with dew, slide down her smooth skin and fall to the ground. Though deep in the heart of the forest, the simple changing room in the bathhouse had a full-length mirror, which reflected her immaculate nude body—her ample bosom and eyes that sparkled like rubies. Though she was of average height, her elegant legs made up almost half her body's length. Aureatia's Seventeenth Minister, Elea the Red Tag, considered her physical appearance to be her most lethal weapon.

She didn't mean this in the sarcastic and vulgar way men spoke about such matters, nor did she feel it out of vanity or obsequiousness. It was an objective truth. Elea was the one who utilized her beautiful face most of all, and there was nothing for her to be ashamed of.

…Grandma told me that, I think. Beauty is a gift allotted by angels when you're born, and you need to use the heavenly gifts to bring happiness to others.

The vague contemplations swirled around her thoughts as she brushed her vivid chestnut hair.

She realized that in the six small months since coming to this village, her meditations on beauty and youth had become more frequent.

—My idea is different.

Beauty wasn't a static grace, bestowed by angels. It was just an ephemeral aspect, rooted in one's life and old age.

For example, even those blessed with pretty faces would lose all trace of their original beauty should they be afflicted by a terrible pox. Others still could lose it from being scarred in combat.

Even for those lucky enough to avoid such misfortunes, should they be careless with their own attractive features, much like a castle garden no longer being pruned, that natural beauty would fall into ruin, becoming crude and unrefined.

Her mother had harshly ingrained the concept in her. Above all, she said, this idea was what separated the superficial beauty of a lady of the night and the pure, refined charms of an aristocratic princess. Then reminding her that the two of them were now nobility themselves.

Beauty manifested from the combination of innate gifts and personal effort. It required constant maintenance. She was to always be neat and tidy.

Finishing her simple grooming routine, she opened the wooden door to the bath. Elea recognized the shadow on the other side of the steam.

"Yawika?"

"Teacher!"

Hot water sprayed into the air from the momentum of the young girl jumping to her feet.

Elea wasn't wearing her glasses, but she could still distinguish Yawika through the fog. Unlike the other elves, she had brown skin. Her behavior was immature, but the girl was, in fact, still young. While elves lived longer lives compared to minia, she was most likely still only ten or eleven years old.

"Yaaay! Over here, over here! I thought you already went back to Aureatia! Meoki and Ae were feeling sad… Wow, teacher, you're super-duper pretty!"

"I-is that so? Thank you. Classes are over, but I'll still be in this village until tomorrow. I wanted to take a bath here one last time."

"Yeah! Will Kia be here till tomorrow, too?"

"Of course. I'll be sure to have her give everyone a proper good-bye before we leave."

Admiring Yawika's velvety skin as she snuggled up to Elea, Elea felt the girl seemed to be built from entirely different material in comparison to a minia. On top of that, she would see no decline in her beautiful features for close to a hundred years.

Everyone in this village, from baby elves to their parents, enjoyed a similar level of divine beauty, as if it was their birthright, without paying their appearances anything close to Elea's level of attention and effort.

"Hey, teacher! Hold class! Just for me!"

Both done rinsing off and now soaking together in the bath, Yawika's magenta eyes sparkled as she leaned in toward Elea.

Six small months had passed since Elea had come to the Eta Sylvan Province. A small month consisted of forty-two days. There were nine small months in a year, so she had, in fact, spent more than half a year in contact with the elven children while posing as their teacher.

As with minia children, each of the elves in the village had their own quirks. But to Elea, who had come to the village as an educator, children like Yawika were the cutest of the bunch, overflowing with a desire to learn.

"Well, I suppose if you insist… Now, it'll have to be a short lesson so you don't get too far ahead. We'll just go over the Word Arts groups."

"Yay!"

Smiling at the girl, Elea ladled water into a number of buckets.

She considered that she might have originally been better suited as an educator instead of one of Aureatia's officials. A path she could no longer pursue.

"There are four big groups of Word Arts. Elves don't really differentiate among them that much, but central…rather, in minia scholarship, it's different."

"Yeah! Thermal Arts, Craft Arts, and, and, ummm…"

"Amazing. Knowing two off the bat is quite impressive. Did you learn that from a book?"

“*Tee-hee…!* I heard about it from Muya next door, but I really know three of them! Um, um…”

“Thermal Arts. Craft Arts. Force Arts. Life Arts. Those four.”

“Right, right! Life Arts! I remember now!”

“Good girl.”

Elea stroked Yawika’s long silver hair, and the young girl squirmed and wriggled her body with happiness.

Of course, if she was to be precise, these four groups did not entirely explain all the Word Arts that constructed their world. For instance, the arts that gave golems and skeletons their own autonomous will and life were known as Demon Arts and didn’t fit among any of the other four categories.

“You already know Thermal Arts, right? Remember the ability your mother is always using in the kitchen?”

“I already know how to use those!”

“Well now. In that case, think you’ll be able to cook me a nice meal when I come back to visit?”

“Woo-hoo! Leave it to me!”

While holding Yawika in her hand, Elea dipped a finger into one of the buckets filled with water.

“Elea io yethar. Secat tent. Vekuons. En ou kroah. Quonocks.” (From Elea to Eta’s water. Wingless insect. Bulging leaves. Softened backbone. Fly.)

“Bwah?!”

The water’s surface in the bucket burst. A spray of hot water splashed up with force, drenching Yawika’s face.

“Oh no! I’m sorry. I’m not very good with Force Arts, actually…”

“It’s okay! I’m totally fine! Is that what that was?”

“They’re arts that move things or send them flying. For example, let’s see… Have you ever seen any of the adults bend one of the arrows they’ve fired before?”

“Yeah! I think!”

“They let you do that, too. Learn them for yourself, and there are even some who can use them to fly in the air, though only for just a moment.”

If one was to apply them to minia physics, Thermal Arts would be described as manipulating the scalar, while Force Arts manipulated the vector.

Thermal Arts created energy at an intended location, such as fire, electricity, or light. Conversely, Force Arts applied momentum at will to preexisting energy or matter.

The concepts were still difficult for the young Yawika to understand, but naturally combining both allowed one to shoot fireballs or make precise lightning attacks.

“Okay, okay, so what’re Craft Arts?”

“Why don’t we start there, then? Let’s see… Watch closely, okay? I’m going to try something a little funny… *Era io yethar. 40ermy tio. Shept alle.*

Pewrezez nesder. Gubzerbe." (From Elea to Eta's water. Twenty-two bones. The soil of the seafloor. Terminus ash. Halt.)

Beyond allowing for mutual language comprehension, Word Arts could be used only on soil, vessels, or living creatures with which the user had a tacit understanding, but since the water in front of her belonged to a region where she had stayed for six small months, Elea could twist it into surprising shapes. For example—

Elea grasped the hot water in the bucket and pulled it out. The water kept its shape when gripped in Elea's hand, and it didn't even lose shape when she let go.

"Wh-what…? Ice?!"

"*Heh.* Is it?"

"Wh-whoa, it's warm! It's not ice! But how?!"

"Craft Arts changes the shape of things. There are people in the village who make bows and tableware, right? Just as bending a tree branch can make a bow, you can even change the shape of hot water like this if you try hard enough."

"Amaaazing!"

In truth, turning a fluid into a fixed shape like this was quite an advanced level of Word Arts. It would be very difficult for someone without an affinity for Craft Arts to pull off.

Naturally, this was nothing more than entertainment, and in most cases, Craft Arts were used to turn materials from a familiar region into a previously determined shape. While it wasn't seen as an important group of arts to non-minia races, the arts were indispensable when creating complex items and helped support the progress of civilization.

"Life Arts are, to put it simply, the Words Arts of a doctor. You've had someone treat a cold or an injury of yours before, right?"

"Grandma Micchi does that! But I've been real healthy for a long time, and I haven't gotten any injuries, either!"

"That's right. But no matter how amazing Grandma Micchi may be, she can't treat any of my injuries. Do you know why that is?"

"Ummm…"

"Unless you've spent a long time sitting face-to-face with someone, it's impossible to know which words you can use in your Word Arts to directly heal them. The same way it works with the wind and water and the trees and metal. Of course, that goes for me and for you, too."

"You and I can't do it, either?"

"Nope. But unlike living creatures, water is very obedient. I'll teach you another thing you can do with Life Arts."

Elea muttered another incantation, and this time, she took her index finger that had been stuck in the bucket and had Yawika stick it in her tiny mouth.

"Mm! It's sweet!"

“That’s right. Life Arts doesn’t change the shape of something, like Craft Arts, but instead changes the properties of things. It can repair damaged cells, heal wounds, and change water into wine.”

“Really? Then can Grandma Micchi do that, too? I asked her once how she was able to heal people’s wounds, and she just said she could do it somehow.”

“Elves are quite gifted in the Life Arts, so that might be why. I’m most proficient with Life Arts, too, actually.”

Of course, in Elea’s case, her Life Arts were used not for healing the sick but for making poisons.

The fact wasn’t limited to Life Arts, but if someone understood their target enough to directly use Word Arts commands, it was equivalent to holding constant life-or-death authority over them. Of course, societal trust meant people generally didn’t regard their doctors with suspicion, but if an attending physician ordered someone to die, they could induce their patient’s death. Anecdotes in Aureatia were not uncommon about people fearful of assassination rejecting Life Arts, relying instead on technical medicine, ultimately shortening their own lives.

Therefore, as a means to power, Elea had studied Word Arts…and Life Arts in particular. Enough that she easily explained the theory of Word Arts to a bathing child.

Although a member of the nobility, the truth of her parentage was that she was a prostitute’s daughter, and she had gained a limited seat among Aureatia’s Twenty-Nine Officials at such a young age because she had *coincidentally* also been the successor to the seat of the previous Seventeenth Minister, who had died in an *unfortunate case of poisoning*.

Unlike most of the unintelligent beasts of the natural world, among the minia race, it was the females, not the males, who were less violent.

However, even without power of their own, by using their charms, they could ensnare those who did have power. They could lead judgment astray and make others fall to their schemes. Even after the dust settled, the fools who realized their own immoral behavior were too deeply enthralled to raise a single cry of suspicion.

Curry favor with her beauty and destroy from within. That was the power wielded by Elea the Red Tag.

“Now, no more class for today. I’ll be sure to continue from where I left off the next time I’m here, okay?”

“Yeah! Um…teacher…?”

“Yes, yes, what is it—? *Eep?!*”

Without warning, Yawika dived into Elea’s chest, eliciting a strange yelp. With an impudence reserved only for children, Yawika buried her face in Elea’s breasts, giggling.

“*Tee-hee...* I love you, teacher! I’ll still love you, even after you go back to Aureatia!”

“Y-yes, well…erm. I love you, too, Yawika.”

“Your boobs are so big; they’re amazing!”

“Th-that has nothing to do with anything!”

It was a night where both the big moon and small moon were visible. For Elea, it was her final night to enjoy these moments of serenity.

Afterward, Elea chatted idly with Yawika for a little while, and then, for just a moment, her mind drifted to the reason behind her visit to the village. A reason she could never reveal to Yawika.

◆

She walked back alone. Most of the village’s hot-spring baths were on the outskirts, and Elea had to traverse a dreary forest path to get back to her borrowed lodgings.

“Do all minia baths take that long?”

The question came from up in the trees. A young girl’s voice, one with which Elea was very familiar.

“Yawika was dizzy, you know. She’s still young, after all. Can you stop forcing her to keep you company during your long minia baths, Professor Viper?”

“You shouldn’t…”

Elea’s eyes narrowed behind her glasses, and she looked up at the darkness above her.

There she saw a strange and unnatural construction.

Numerous thin vines were standing vertically atop the ground, nothing supporting them at all. At the top, the vines wove together into a seat, and sitting there was a small young girl with blond hair.

“…call people names, Kia. What are you doing in a place like this?”

“What do you mean, *a place like this*? I wanted to jump in the bath after you were out, but you took so dang long.”

“You shouldn’t use your Word Arts to peep on people, either.”

“How—?! Don’t make fun of me! Disgusting! There are just less bugs and stuff when you’re up high! It’s easier!”

“*Heh-heh.* What, did you want to join my lesson with Yawika, too?”

“*Bleh!* Like I want to study! Yawika’s just a weird girl who likes school!”

Essentially Yawika’s polar opposite, Kia had never once taken her Word Arts studies seriously. If Elea was to give out a written test, she was positive that Kia would score the absolute lowest out of all the students in the Eta Sylvan Province.

Elea glanced at the vines supporting Kia. The tendrils, so thin the heft of a satchel would weigh them down, stretched straight up, maintaining an orderly structure. A pinnacle of Life Arts, twisting life and making it possible to imbue the durability of steel into a single thread of cotton.

The fact that the construction grew up from the ground, in opposition of gravity, and continued to support the young girl’s weight was the result of dexterously controlled Force Arts being used in perpetuity.

“Put me down in front of teacher.”

Kia spun her Word Arts, and the vines smoothly bent and placed the young girl, sitting in their braided cage, down on the ground. Elea had to admit that if she was capable of such feats, then it must have been more convenient than climbing trees herself…assuming the “convenience” was enough of a reason to constantly keep such complicated Word Arts commands going.

“Return.”

Then the plant folded in on itself, as if it were going backward in time, before settling down in the palm of Kia’s small hand.

Left over was but a single grain of seed, no bigger than her pinkie in size.

“You can have it back. Thank you.”

The girl sent the seed flying up into the darkness overhead. The seed cut a strange path, flying toward the weeds growing around a tree. The seed was sucked inside a fruit, unseasonably ripe, before the fruit transformed back into a flower, followed by the whole bud disappearing, leaving only thick leaf growth behind.

“…Kia. You really shouldn’t use your Word Arts willy-nilly like that. Your power—”

“—is a gift to bring happiness to others, right? This is ridiculous. It’s always the same with you.”

“I’m begging you, please start listening to what your teacher has to say… Your power is extremely special. Isn’t it boring to always be putting it to such…*normal* use?”

“Hmph. If I can spend my days having fun, I’m fine with normal.”

“The world outside Eta isn’t normal, though. After our stop in the New Principality of Lithia, you’ll immediately start attending school in Aureatia. It won’t just be elves, either. There’ll be all sorts of people, even dwarves and leprechauns. Some of the other students might think you’re weird and say nasty things about you.”

“There are people like that at school in Aureatia?”

Word Arts were classified into four categories, with a user’s individual skill and racial aptitude adding specific strengths and weaknesses into the mix.

Word Arts required a special incantation, and upon execution, the words would create a link to one’s very soul.

These arts were born of a mutual understanding of wills that occurred once the user understood the vessel, person, and place involved in the incantation.

There was an exception, however. The Words Arts of one person—Kia—went against every one of these principles.

“…That’s right. You’re headed to Aureatia, remember? Think about how others will perceive you.”

“I don’t care. People can say whatever they want. Doesn’t make a difference to me!”

Her body was slender and delicate, like crafted porcelain. Her blond hair, tinged with white, gently swayed in the breeze. Her turquoise eyes, like a transparent lake surface, angled slightly inward.

However, this appearance was quite normal among the elves, the fairest of the world's races.

When sizing up the vulgar fourteen-year-old elf girl, nothing about her immediately attested to her peculiarity.

At that very moment, she wore a boastful smile, the same as any other child her age.

"After all…I just have to say *die* to those creeps, and they'd all drop dead where they stood!"

Exceptions did exist.

She was a genius without peer. An unparalleled prodigy.

◆

The sky was cloudy for the morning of their departure.

The Eta Sylvan Province was a rainy region to begin with, with the dense year-round fog keeping people away from the secluded region. The cloudy weather was commonplace.

As she fought her daily battle with anemia, Elea finished up her plain breakfast of boiled oats and a soup made from the milk of forest goats.

When she had first arrived in the village, where everything, from the level of civilization to the food culture, was different from what she was used to, she had needed help with even the most menial of chores. At this point, though, she could handle almost all of them by herself.

I wonder if Kia's already outside… How unusual.

For the two small months since she had become the girl's exclusive tutor, she had lived together with Kia. When it came to their hatred of mornings, the two were astonishingly similar.

Oh, great… And on our departure day…

Grumbling to herself, Elea left the house. In the plaza right in front, she saw three children.

"Ah! Teacherrrr!"

"Good morning. Don't you think it's embarrassing for an adult your age to be sleeping so late?"

"Teacher… H-Hello…"

Elea immediately straightened out her posture and snapped her drowsy and languid look into a perfect smile.

In the village, she was a model private tutor, beautiful and kind. At the very least, that's how she presented herself in front of all the children besides Kia.

"Good morning, Yawika, Thien… And you, Kia, you shouldn't always be so rude to other people."

“Um, today’s the day you’re leaving, and Thien said he wanted to come, too, so we came to say good-bye!”

“Um, no, I…j-just…um…”

“*Tee-hee.* Is that so? I’m happy you came to see me off, too, Thien.”

“…Y-yeah…”

Thien was the oldest among them, but he still cowered behind Kia’s back like a skittish rabbit.

Elea was well aware of his feelings for her, and there were moments when she would use that knowledge to tease him.

“They came all this way to say good-bye, and you still couldn’t get out of bed. You were getting bored, too, right, Yawika?”

“Nuh-uh! You were here to play with us! The hawthorn berries were cold and tasty, too!”

“L-like I’d be playing around with a kid like you! Don’t go blabbering about stuff that’s not important! Honestly, you’ve still got some stuck to your cheek…! Lemme wipe it off.”

“Mmmmhhhph!”

Elea looked at the slender hawthorn berry tree, rising up from the small stream flowing through the plaza. Kia must have used her Word Arts to make it grow large enough to feed the berries to Yawika.

Kia was almost omnipotent. She had been gifted with an incredible aptitude for Word Arts.

Within this secluded forest village, her talents only extended to making hawthorn berry trees bear fruit and entertaining the younger children with light and fire. In the small world of the forest, free of competition and enemies to fight, she had no reason to use any more of her power.

“T-teacher! Kia may act like that, but…the village children, the adults, we all…um, we’re very grateful, and…”

“Really now? And how about you, Thien?”

“*Eep!* M-me too…! I-I’m very grateful. Before you came, I didn’t even know where the clouds in the sky came from. Everyone’s gotten a lot smarter, and it’s all thanks t-to you. Truly.”

Thien nervously stepped forward and looked Elea in the eye.

“If that’s true, then as your teacher, hearing that makes me the happiest of all. I said it once in class, didn’t I? Wisdom is like a seed—”

“—and knowledge is the life water that will nurture and sustain it. But M-Miss Elea’s the one who sowed that seed in the first place. We’ve caused nothing but trouble, and we can’t do anything to thank you properly…”

Elea patted Thien’s head affectionately. Then she gave him a tight hug.

With his head nestled into her chest, Thien softly yelped like a cornered baby animal.

“Oh, please. Nothing makes me happier than knowing I’ve taught my adorable students well. Right, Yawika?”

“Yeah! I love teacher!”

“You’re *so* shameless, honestly… She’s the bad kind of adult. She managed to trick Mom and Dad, too. And you too, Yawika! You can’t keep cozying up to her forever!”

“K-Kia, you just don’t want to go study in Aureatia… You’re jealous.”

“Pfft, it’s a lot weirder to *want* to study, if you ask me!”

“My, my…*hee-hee*. Can’t you be honest with yourself for once, Kia?”

Elea was not an educator.

She was a member of Aureatia’s Twenty-Nine Officials, the Seventeenth Minister. This fact remained unknown to all the elves in the village.

Devoutly attending to Kia, she managed to convince her parents, who were at a loss as to how to deal with their daughter’s uninhibited behavior, to let Elea be the girl’s personal teacher and have her study abroad in Aureatia. She had a very clear goal behind her actions.

Kia can definitely win.

Kia was nearly omnipotent. Not even old enough to receive her second name, she possessed unrivaled Word Arts power. Should a power like this quietly waste away in this secluded world, only used as a convenient parlor trick?

In the small world of the forest, free of competition and enemies to fight, she had no reason to use any more of her power.

—In that case, what if someone else came along who was able to give her a reason?

If Kia fought, she wouldn’t need to heat the winds with Thermal Arts and rain fire down on an enemy. She could just make her opponent burst into flames.

Prominent masters of Craft Arts were able to transform soil into blades to slice their enemies to ribbons. Kia needed no such technique. She could shape and rework her enemies’ very forms in any way she desired.

At the Imperial Competition to decide the Hero, if such an overpowering existence—yet unknown to anyone and unheard of, even within the realm of armchair theorizing—suddenly showed up to compete… What would the other candidates’ expressions look like then?

No matter who her opponent may be, the World Word is going to win. Even Second General Rosclay…would be no match for her power.

What Elea the Red Tag was after was power. All the truer after gaining her seat within Aureatia’s central governing body, she wanted absolute authority, not as a single functioning substitute among the other twenty-nine members, with no one able to threaten her or disdain her for the circumstances of her birth.

She didn’t care if that meant trading in her endless toiling efforts to achieve the innocent trust placed in her to get it.

“Kia, Kia! Let’s go to our spot! We’re not gonna see each other for a while!”

“Ugggh… I don’t need to go there… It’s really not a big deal…”

This time, Yawika turned her fawning behavior on Kia. The young girl was overflowing with childish stamina.

“I’ve never heard about this before… Where is it?”

“As your teacher, I’m curious myself. Is this place a favorite of yours, Kia?”

“What?! D-don’t be ridiculous; Yawika likes it, not me! I was just going with her!”

“Take me, take me!”

Kia looked, at least on the outside, like the whole idea was an annoyance to her.

Yawika didn’t take her response at face value, however. Kia was rude, and her grades were poor, but all the elves in the village knew her very well.

“Honestly…! Professor Viper can wait here! It’s not that big a deal!”

“Fine, fine… But maybe I’ll just tag along anyway.”

“Just stay here!”

Kia began walking with the other two children in tow.

The Eta Sylvan Province was a combination of rivers and trees, with rolling mountains.

If there were still any routes in the village Elea had yet to travel, she wanted to know about them.

Later in the afternoon, she would be leaving the village behind for good.

“…So there’s a path through the bushes on that hill over there?”

“Yep! On the other side of the hill, right around where you can see the village watchtowers, you can slip through.”

“It probably runs parallel with the elves’ path for the animals of the forest to travel through. We could run into some deer or boars.”

“…My Force Arts would be enough to handle a boar.”

“That’s amazing, Thien!”

“Well, *I* could grab the whole group at once and hang them up at the very top of that tall tree over there instead!”

“You’re amazing, too, Kia!”

“Come on now—don’t leave your teacher behind.”

The path Kia led the group down was very narrow for someone of Elea’s height to squeeze through, with branches and leaves getting stuck to her overcoat.

Both her hands sunk into the dirt each time she passed under an arch of trees.

The experience was something Elea never would have had back in Aureatia. The Seventeenth Minister put all her attention toward her appearance and behavior during her schemes and intrigue, and only in this village were there times when she’d embrace her inner child.

Having never gotten to experience them for herself, the teacher ended up learning about these childlike experiences from her own students.

Finally…

…This will work. A minia adult could advance through here in a single file without issue. Judging from our direction, we'll come about midway up the fourth mountain. The people of the village don't know about this route. Plenty useful.

Elea's mind was always taking such things into account.

If there were still any routes in the village Elea had yet to travel, she wanted to know about them.

During the harvest festival, when she'd stood with her students and watched the adults perform their flame dance, she had let out a sigh of admiration at the display of fire and beauty. Conversely, she had recorded how long the men had been gone from the village to prepare for the event and what defenses had been set in place while they were away.

When she tried teaching about the practical uses for the vegetation found in the forest, she had been embarrassed to learn that the elves knew about all of it already. That night, she organized which medicinal herbs could be used to treat injuries and which mountain vegetables could serve as food provisions during a march, writing it all down and attaching it to a bird to send back to Aureatia.

For six small months, Elea had thoroughly surveyed the mysterious place, veiled in a dense fog to keep others away.

This village is peaceful. They aren't wary of possible infiltration. A single platoon would be enough to do the job.

The day was sure to come when Aureatia would seize every inch of this bountiful village.

This was the foundation of the minia nation's rebirth following their wounded and impoverished fate at the hands of the True Demon King.

Kia, the rare prodigy, would become the Hero under Elea's wing. The leftover village would be entirely converted into resources for the nation.

The rumors about "one who wielded omnipotent Word Arts" had existed during the age of the True Demon King, and Elea had learned the whereabouts of this individual village from a previously captured soldier of the New Principality. In that moment, the forest village's status as an unknown land of mystery was instantly shattered.

That soldier was no longer part of this world. By disposing of the few people who knew the link between Elea and the World Word, no one would be able to prepare for Kia's power.

Curry favor with beautiful looks and corrode things from within.

Before her espionage, all fell with ease. Her second name, inviting both fire and blood, was Elea the Red Tag.

"…Okay, we're here! Teacher!"

Elea raised her head. Just as she had predicted, they appeared to be halfway up a mountain, looking out over a deep valley.

"Phew, that was tough! Are you tired, too, teacher?"

"Ummm…I'm fine. Is this it?"

Sighing with a hint of exhaustion, Elea looked up and examined the scenery.

It was not an exceptionally moving view.

The far-off mountains were hidden in the clouds, and the whole landscape looked like a vague silhouette outlined in the fog.

“Well…that’s it. I told you! It’s not anything special! I told you I didn’t need to come up here! Great, now my last memory of the village is all dreary and dull!”

Kia awkwardly laughed, sitting on a rock.

This place was a secret from everyone. Elea could clearly tell that by bringing her here, the children all considered her a very close friend.

Suddenly, Thien spoke up.

“…It shouldn’t be cloudy like this, right? Kia, can’t you just clear it up?”

“Ooooh! He’s right! Good thing you’re here, Kia!”

“Hmm…? What do you two mean by that?”

“Give me a break. You make it sound so simple…”

Kia looked fed up as she turned her attention beyond the cliff’s edge.

Lightly twirling the tips of her blond hair with her finger, she then awkwardly looked at Elea.

“…I’m not trying to show off or anything, okay?”

She issued her next command with a huff.

“Clear up.”

Her whisper, with its mystical tinge, surpassed the aural limits of language and echoed out over the sky’s horizon.

It was like the receding waves of the sea.

The thick layer of clouds blocking the sky simultaneously all flowed out and away and ceased blocking the view.

Elea watched the gray clouds as they left, absent a single gust of wind, as though time itself were rewinding.

As if the whole world she had known before left with the clouds and was being carried on toward a new far-off place beyond the horizon.

“…Yeah.”

She was invincible. Her power was without equal.

No matter what opponent tried to stand in her way, Kia was sure to beat them. Just knowing that fact was enough for Elea.

The exposed morning light passed over the landscape, shining azure.

The foggy outlines of the mountains in the distance were penetrated by the bright light, bringing them clearly into view.

The vast lake, once covered by the thick fog, spread out across the valley floor.

There, the entire beautiful spectacle reflected on the water’s surface.

The Eta Sylvan Province. Elea had lived there. All the warm and gentle days, together with the children—it had all been here.

“See, I told you. The scenery is totally nothing special.”

Turning her beauty into a weapon, Elea had focused on gaining power to ensure she would never be mocked or scorned again.

Even the beauty being displayed before her now, just like everything else, was nothing more than a means to an end for her.

Elea the Red Tag felt not a hint of shame for living her life this way.

“Teacher, are you okay? Are you crying…?”

“Hmm…? What’s wrong?”

“You’re crying.”

Yawika pulled at Elea’s sleeve as she made her odd comment.

Elea tried to smile.

“I’m not crying.”

She couldn’t bring herself to look at the children. She could only stand there, unable to peel her eyes from the scenery before her.

It was her final morning in the elf village.

She was right. Yawika’s comment was obviously off base.

Elea remained ever their flawless, beautiful, and kind teacher.

“…I’m not crying at all.”

She had the power to ignore any and all defenses, bending existence itself to her will.

She exercised the authority to surpass nature, controlling weather and geography with a single word.

She was a singularity, beyond the predictions of the universe, who defied all estimations and analysis.

An omnipotent, peerless prodigy, whose limits were still yet to be measured.

The Elf Wizard.

Kia the World Word.

CHAPTER 9 Higuare the Pelagic

Inside Lithia's central stronghold, Lana the Moon Tempest finished presenting the two newly hired mercenaries to Taren after their harrowing return to the city through the raiders' attack.

Everyone was seated, but the survey soldier Lana's small frame was halfway buried between the high armrests of the meeting room chairs.

"Shalk the Sound Slicer. Higuare the Pelagic. You did well to find them, Lana. Though…I had hoped you would find the World Word as well."

"Unfortunately, no one I encountered seemed to match the description. Surely, it must've just been an exaggerated rumor of some sort. Though, if there was someone with almighty Word Arts like that, hell, it'd make any battle a breeze to win."

"Hmm. If they do exist, our first step should be thinking up measures to keep such a dangerous person in check."

A skeleton and mandrake. While they certainly wielded tremendous fighting strength, they were unusual figures that the minia kingdoms, including Aureatia, didn't commonly employ. Nevertheless, what Taren sought were outstanding champions, capable of routing a hundred soldiers single-handedly. To her, their race was of little consequence.

In this land, it was possible for deviations to far exceed all known common logic. This was no more clearly proven than by the boundless legends and realities, most of all the previous existence of the True Demon King.

"First, I've heard the rumors about you, Higuare the Pelagic. An undefeated duelist on the frontier."

"That's correct. I've been fighting for a fairly long time. In minia years, I believe it adds up to around thirteen or fourteen years' time."

"…Slave fighting, then?" Shalk questioned, cocking his skull to the side as he gazed at the spires outside. Taren answered in Higuare's stead.

"The frontier's home to savage places where they gamble on people's and beasts' lives. This, of course, is illegal. In Aureatia, the rights of slaves have been on the upward trend in recent years, but…during the dark age of the True Demon King, there were many places that sank quietly beneath the kingdom's watchful eye."

"That's not what I mean. I'm saying during those fourteen years of his, he was at some racketeer's beck and call, right? That makes me suspicious about that 'undefeated' reputation."

"Shalk does make a fair point. If it's not too much, could you explain yourself, Higuare?"

"Of course. Though my story is a trivial one."

◆

Higuare the Pelagic was born in a forest on the western frontier, totally unknown to the races of minia-kind.

Among the mandrakes, a race of sentient plants, he grew to be bigger than any of his fellow mandrakes, almost as tall as a minia. As such, the minia living in a nearby city picked and “harvested” him.

He was meant to be felled in the minia-run combat arena, a beastfolk for their entertainment.

In the darkness, he remembered the first conversation he’d exchanged with a minia.

“You know how to hold a weapon?”

“No. I don’t understand.”

“It’s a sword, stupid. This may be a slave arena, but the attendees aren’t gonna get hyped to see a mandrake get killed without putting up a fight. Learn how to hold that short sword by tomorrow morning.”

“Okay. And I just have to fight with it?”

“Assuming you even can with those roots of yours.”

The world of the minia races completely foreign to him, Higuare simply accepted the situation as commonplace, without either anger or despair.

Which was why he did exactly as he was told.

The next morning’s spectacle displayed the mandrake from the mysterious forest repeatedly stabbing and dispatching all the other slave fighters in the arena.

Due to their origins as plants, mandrakes are assumed by many to be sluggish creatures. However, their flexible tendrils are equipped with strength not unlike a steel coil, and the speed with which they can burst out of their bodies, depending on the individual’s physique and skill, make them even stronger.

Additionally, all mandrakes are poisonous. The deadly poison is one of the most lethal chemical substances in the world, with trace amounts being enough to dissolve nerve cells and quickly kill its victims with intense pain and respiratory trauma.

Simply laying out the plain facts, it was clear his captors were fools for planning on using the oversize mandrake as a performer. For Higuare, it was a blessing in disguise. The ignorance and self-conceit displayed by his first few opponents handed him his victories.

“Who will be my opponent for my next match?”

“Match…? There’s no way in hell we’re putting something like you in a one-on-one fight. Instead of the worthless slaves you’ve been fighting, you’re going up against three top-ranked fighters. And just to be clear, it ain’t a *match*. They’re puttin’ you down. Go out there and give us an entertaining death.”

“But I do not wish to die.”

“That’s too bad, Higuare. In this arena, it’s either kill or be killed.”

“Kill or be killed.”

Higuare was obedient. In the following day's match, he killed his three opponents.

He fully accepted his new reality. Kill or be killed. Just as he had been told, he would not die as long as he continued to kill.

Completely lost about how to swing a sword at first, the mandrake practiced. He watched the fighters who had been there longer than he had, no matter their race, and naturally adopted the more impressive techniques for himself. While defeating his opponents with his lethal poison and the cutting slices of his vines, he still observed how other fighters drove their opponents into a corner, avoided danger, and formed their battle strategies, all being forced to fight with their lives on the line.

If there was a single talent of Higuare's that was purely his own and not an innate part of his mandrake heritage, it was his obedience.

"No more matches for you. I sold you off to another city."

The person he conversed with that day appeared not to be the guard who had always handled him but instead the promoter and owner of the arena.

With the public procurement of slaves being banned by the kingdom's laws, Higuare, who continued to single-handedly kill any opponent he faced, had become a fighter who was too much for a small city's arena to handle.

"Understood. A new master, then? I wonder if I'll be fighting even stronger opponents."

"I assume so. Whether you've got intelligence or can use Word Arts, you're still a beastfolk, all told. Next fight, *you're* gonna end up dead."

"Why is that? I was born a beastfolk, so I have no control over it."

"It looks better to see monsters getting killed by the minia races, that's why. Reason's that simple."

"…No. I don't want to die."

If there was a single rebellious will within Higuare, it was his will to defy death.

That will solidified with each match he fought, with the mandrake himself unsure why.

Do I want to live…? What meaning is there in a life like this?

He had no attachment to life. He simply didn't want to die.

Once a captive regular soldier of the kingdom challenged him with a tempered and well-polished blade.

"Higuare…! Don't hold it against me! I'm gonna cut you down and get back home!"

"I understand. I don't bear you any ill will."

Not only is he spinning from his waist, but he's using his spine like a bow to shoot himself for a quick opening strike. If I was to replicate that with my body, I'd interlock my internal fibrovascular bundles…

Another time, an ogre who had eaten twelve village children challenged him with a large hatchet, requiring more strength to wield than any of the minia races could muster.

“What a good day. These minia worms will watch this battle and tremble. If they’re gonna look down on races like ours, then we gotta show them just how terrifying we can be, eh, Higuare?”

“Indeed.”

Though I’m faster, his strength overshadows mine. I don’t have the power to push him back. If I send several vine slices at the precise moment, then…

Once, he had been brought out and used as target practice for a group of gun-wielding executioners.

“Higuare. You’ve battled real hard up until now. Today’s your last big performance.”

“Thank you very much.”

I’ll watch the muscles in their fingers. I want to test if my slashes will be fast enough to match the speed of a bullet. If I use the recoil from launching my vines to disappear outside their field of vision, then, assuming these executioners react the same way slave fighters do…

Even while he obediently accepted each new and extremely disadvantaged fight, on top of surviving, he observed his opponents and further honed his skills to develop himself for the merciless fights to come. Although he was without a mentor, at the same time, all the slaves he killed had been his teachers in a way.

Despite being subjected to one-sided and unscrupulous fights every time, Higuare faced no judgment outside of his matches. His obedience never gave the arena promoter the opportunity to do so.

Finally, once he became known as the strongest arena fighter there was, even the audiences began wishing for Higuare the Pelagic’s defeat. The peerless slave no one could manage to slay.

The ideal trajectory to thrust my short sword…

The opinions of those around him had absolutely no sway on the mandrake. He continued his unending sword wielding in his underground cell.

Outside of the ring, the meager water droplets and fissures in the darkness served as his training targets.

I need to study other methods more effective than poison. I might lose next time. My next opponent might see through my strategy.

He contemplated these strategies, not out of cowardice or self-restraint but as the simple facts laid out before him. Higuare continued to candidly believe what he had been told—*the next match will be even more dangerous; this time it’s your turn to die*.

As he devoted himself to fighting, slowly the other slave fighters’ numbers began to dwindle, and the audience numbers began to drop. A strange terror flickered now and again within the speech of his guard, and others around him grew restless. These changes did nothing to distract Higuare from his training.

While he was captured, the times changed. The True Demon King arrived.

Then, the fated day came. Suddenly, Higuare the Pelagic was a free being.

The underground prison was thrown open, and all the slave fighters were liberated. The True Demon King's army was at the doorstep.

There were flames. He saw minia killing each other. The madness of the True Demon King's army was blanketing the city.

A question came to Higuare's mind as he advanced against the crowds of people fleeing the madness.

Why didn't they fight back?

He slayed the deranged enemies who set upon him like they were nothing.

Thrusting his short sword between their ribs, he twisted it before pulling it out. The people who had lived in the outside world died just the same as the warriors he had fought in the arena.

"I see."

He couldn't help but mutter to himself. After delivering death to someone from the outside world for the first time, he finally came to understand.

Even after gaining freedom, nothing about the world had changed. Kill or be killed. The very first lesson he had learned and dutifully followed his whole life had been true.

Well then.

He continued to win. To live meant trampling over the hopes of other creatures to survive and to stand strong within the world.

The enslaved arena fighters who faced him, the beasts without Word Arts, and the near-thousand opponents he had fought against all wanted this very thing. They must have.

I see. So this must be "pride," then.

Though now free…when he thought about all those who had died at his hands, he knew there was no way *opponents of this level* would be able to kill him.

Higuare the Pelagic was an unrivaled fighter and never lost.

He had wanted to live.

"Haaaah…"

It was a monotone and meaningless utterance. It was strange that such a voice would come out of his own mouth.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha."

Higuare laughed flatly. It was the first time he had ever laughed in his entire life.

As he did, he turned toward the endless sea of enemies before him.

◆

Time passed, landing him in the present. Since sprouting his mandrake resolve, he knew no life other than that of the sword, now becoming a soldier in Taren the Punished's army.

"When we discovered him…this guy said he had been battling the Demon King Army. I'm not kidding," the tiny Lana told Shalk, amused.

Shalk asked in earnest, "Has this guy met the True Demon King before?"

"Of course not, c'mon. Still, though, we're talking about that army here! No one would ever expect to hear something like that. I wouldn't be surprised to hear this guy was the Hero."

"…If that's true, it is quite the feat. So he's *faced off* against the Demon King Army, huh…?"

Even now, with the True Demon King defeated, almost no one would purposefully mention the Demon King Army. Its lingering existence, the weight of the words alone, was enough to strike fear into any heart.

More so than the deceased True Demon King—their true identity still shrouded in mystery—it was the Demon King Army itself that was the ubiquitous terror, emblematic of the times.

"Yo."

Right as the talk about Higuare ended, the inner door opened, and a young man returned to the room. Looking across the faces gathered there, he spoke.

"I see you've found some more strange fellows, Miss Taren."

"Introduce yourself, Dakai."

The Visitor acknowledged the two guests and approached the mandrake with curiosity.

"That skeleton's a spearman, huh? As for this mandrake, I can't really gather what he's about… Can't even tell where his face is, for starters."

"Shalk the Sound Slicer. Though I believe you were the one told to introduce yourself," the skeleton muttered. "I heard right, didn't I? Forgive me. Senses haven't been the same since I died."

"I am Higuare the Pelagic. Nice to meet you."

"Hmmm… I don't know; are you two really that strong…?" Dakai questioned as he held one of Higuare's weapons in his hand, sizing it up.

…Just a normal dagger, far as I can see. How many does he have stashed inside that body of his?

Taren elected to answer Dakai's question herself.

"They're powerful mercenaries and worthy of trust, just like you. I believe we need individual power to fill our enemy's armies with dread—like the True Demon King. Assuming it will come to armies, but I want a symbol of fear that will stop soldiers in their tracks, long before a drawn-out war fatigues the soldiers and the people."

"That sort of deterrent's effective in times like these, huh? You confident you can manage that, Shalk?"

"Hate to break it to you, but I don't plan on living up to those expectations," Shalk responded calmly.

“Unlike Higuare over there, I’m just a mercenary. No matter how cheap it may be, I don’t work until I get my advance.”

“I know. A survey of the final land, where the True Demon King died, right? Until we get word that the survey’s finished, you’re free to remain on standby, to a degree.”

“*Ha-ha-ha.* You don’t plan to keep avoiding the issue like this, do you?”

“I could ask you the same thing. You don’t think we expect the dead to work for free, do you? If you want to see for yourself, I’ll pay you from my own coffers, right here, right now. I can turn a blind eye to a dual contract.”

“Sounds great. I like big talkers. What about that one over there…?”

As the conversation continued, Dakai took a piece of fruit off a plate on the table. A hawthorn berry. He tossed it toward Higuare.

“…Oddly quiet, aren’t you? What do mandrakes eat anyway?”

“I don’t eat hawthorn berries.”

The fist-size berry froze in the air immediately after it left Dakai’s hand. Then, it fell.

Huh.

Dakai was inwardly impressed. The berry kept its shape after falling onto the table. Cut through, without leaving a single trace behind. It was sliced up so cleanly, each part of the berry still remained in one piece.

“If you’d like to see my capabilities…”

The berry split—two pieces, four pieces, eight pieces. Each fragment immediately began corroding away.

With each of his vine-like arms holding a short dagger, he had sliced through the air three times. Not only that, but all the blades were covered in lethal toxins.

“…then I’ve just shown you.”

Taren smiled fiercely, leisurely clapping her hands a few times.

“Masterfully done.”

The New Principality, under her control, was power. That power, gained through independence from Aureatia’s control, served as a unifying force to gather powerful beings from all across the great wide world.

Brought together in Lithia was a handful of these individuals, a special selection of great talent.

Closely observing Higuare’s movements, Lana the Moon Tempest offered her own perspective.

“…I get it. So a mandrake can use a sword in three arms at once, then? From that distance, though… And then add in the mandrake poison, yeah, that’s some supernatural skill.”

It was truly some fantastical swordsmanship, totally impossible for a minia body to imitate. So this was how Higuare the Pelagic had managed to stay alive.

“No.”

For more than fourteen years, those who had misjudged the extent of Higuare’s abilities had had their lives taken from them.

To be supreme in the world of Shura, it meant one was a monster far beyond normal comprehension, further still than the realm of fantasy.

“I have forty-two of them.”

He possessed dueling skills honed through the colossal amounts of blood spilled in the arena of life and death.

He concealed fatally lethal poison that nothing living could resist.

He boasted innumerable and abhorrent sword strikes, made extreme through his grotesque body.

The ultimate slave through his own will, obeying everything but completely free from the control of others.

The Gladiator Mandrake.

Higuare the Pelagic.

CHAPTER 10 Nastique the Quiet Singer

The trade caravan had set out from Aureatia for the New Principality of Lithia, moving along a roundabout route through smaller-size cities in an attempt to hide from the New Principality's defense network. They had a minimal bodyguard presence as well, with only a select few among the traders even aware of what was being transported in the massive wagon besides the colossal food provisions necessary to keep the gigant wagon pullers fed.

The Twentieth Minister, Hidow the Clamp, was tasked with overseeing the entire caravan operation. Thus, he had numerous similar heavy carriages traveling parallel along different routes, each with a varying number of guards and goods being transported. The plan was to buy time for the true caravan by making the New Principality guard against any sudden attacks.

The transportation operation was large-scale but fell far short of a true military undertaking. None of the other officials was involved with these operations, either. He needed to make Taren's assassination succeed and prevent all-out war through his efforts alone.

They were in a small mountainside city. By the time the final wagon had arrived, the sun had begun to dip, and a light rain was falling. In the tiny city, the problematic heavy carriage could only be lined up with the other carriages in the town plaza, with a guard posted on watch.

"This heavy cargo's really slowing us down. At this rate, it'll take about a day and a half to get there. Hmm. Kuze, are there enough beds for the whole unit?"

Opening up his umbrella, Hidow posed the question to the man behind him.

"Well, I've been told there's an Order poorhouse that has empty beds. As for food, well…I'm sure you understand the difficulties there, Minister Hidow."

The man named Kuze had the second name of the Passing Disaster.

Approaching his late thirties, he was a man with little light left in his eyes. He was a paladin of the Order, which once had territorial claims all over the world, and his long black vestments stuck out among the other merchants' dress.

Belief in the Order, which worshipped the creator of the world, the Word-Maker, along with its unifying presence, were both further casualties of the True Demon King calamity. Charged with teaching simple literacy and giving aid to the poor, adherents of the Order now suffered harsh discrimination and persecution within most territories.

“Like hell are any of my soldiers pitiful enough to beg for scraps from the Order. The foodstuff included in the cargo will cover it. It’ll delay us a bit, but I’m going to have those merchants’ sheets washed, too.”

“*Bweh-heh-heh.* Thankful for that. If there were more people like yourself back in Aureatia, Minister Hidow, then our future would look much brighter, I believe.”

“You think that flattery will get anywhere with me?”

“Oh, whoops, sorry if that’s how it came across.”

Even without the Aureatia government’s trend toward full expulsion of the Order, Hidow’s impression of this paladin was very poor. Someone with a seat among Aureatia’s highest authoritative power directly working with a man like Kuze meant Hidow had considerable trust in his skills. Kuze the Passing Disaster was one of the Order’s few military assets, having no large martial force of their own, and was also an immortal cleaner for the organization, extremely powerful both within and outside the Order.

“Let me be clear—I only came to you out of necessity. The thing we’re escorting here is a lot more dangerous than it looks. On the record, we need strong people unaffiliated with Aureatia on this project. Given our detour, I wanted to have a connection with the Order to secure places to camp.”

“That’s what the merchant camouflage is about, then. So this escort target is worth going to all this effort to keep hidden, then?”

“You just need to keep that in mind—that’s it. So…how about yourself, then?”

Hidow kept his umbrella open, fixing Kuze with his sharp stare.

“If there’s anything else you’re after outside of your reward for this escort mission, then now’s the time to talk about it, one-on-one, right here, far from Aureatia. What ulterior motives are at play here?”

“…Aren’t you worried about getting assassinated? I’m a cleaner for the Order, you know.”

“As if I hadn’t already made plenty sure you’re not the type to do anything that stupid. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have even brought you along.”

In truth, the move by the member of the Twenty-Nine Officials to set off with this favored trade caravan strategy was to contain any danger of being discovered by the forces of the New Principality. However, given the fact that the man had agreed to cooperate in a scheme from the country persecuting his organization, Hidow didn’t plan on slighting him.

“*Bweh-heh-heh.* How kind of you. Oh, no flattery there, either.”

Kuze let out a wretched, dry chuckle. The roadway visible from the town was lit up by the lights of the trade caravan, lined up together.

Blankly staring out at the view, he spoke—

“Can you give the children something tasty to eat?”

“…Huh?”

“I know it’d be an absurd request, given the current state of affairs, to stand on my side…with the Order. But…the orphans staying in town, at the

very least, deserve some happy memories, don't they? It's been a while since I've stopped by this church. Can you let this old man play the hero?"

"That's gonna be impossible. For starters, I'm leaving the city sometime tonight."

The young civil servant felt around in his pockets. Producing an expensive leather wallet, he disdainfully tossed it over to Kuze.

When Kuze's big hands caught the wallet, the heft of the coins stuffed inside rattled together.

"You do it."

Hidow the Clamp, still in his early twenties, was a genius, occupying a space among Aureatia's highest power of authority. His appointment came with vast power and riches, though he had no interest in either, so the money he'd just tossed didn't even amount to an expenditure to him.

However, it was the opposite for the children who Kuze the Passing Disaster looked to protect.

"…Thank you very much, Minister Hidow. May the Word-Maker keep you."

"Save it. Forget bribes—this is the first time I've seen a priest extort money without any hint of shame. You know, talking to you directly has made me realize something…"

Hidow looked Kuze over. Kuze's long black robes seemed to stand out, despite the nighttime darkness.

Even a civil servant like Hidow could see Kuze was a superb and well-trained fighter, but he couldn't come up with any explanation as to how the man had single-handedly annihilated the number of Demon King Army and Order extremists on his résumé. Nor how he always fought alone. None had ever seen the truth behind his fighting abilities.

"…you really are strong, aren't you?"

"*Bweh-heh-heh.* But of course."

Kuze the Passing Disaster laughed. In his eyes were neither flames of passion nor tinges of self-conceit. Instead, they reflected only fatigue and resignation, completely unbecoming of one confident in his absolute strength.

"I have an angel on my side, you see."

◆

As the sounds of the rain grew louder, the leaves of the thick forest canopy grew damp.

After parting ways with Hidow, Kuze arrived in front of a building outside the town, cracks running through its walls. He'd heard that the priest solely in charge of the poorhouse had collapsed with pneumonia two small months earlier and was still in the middle of receiving treatment in a neighboring town.

Emerging to greet the visitors was an eighteen-year-old girl, a young priest-in-training.

“Mr. Kuze! How many years has it been?”

The girl appeared to have been doing chores late into the night, still dressed in her lightly dirtied work clothes. Kuze’s big hand patted her shortly cropped hair, a difference from when he had last seen her six years ago.

“*Bweh-heh-heh.* I’m back, Ripel. How long *has* it been now…? Sorry for bringing so many guests.”

“Oh, no need to apologize! Of course, Mr. Anida picks now of all times to be sick! He’s always had the worst luck…”

“Believe me, I know. Can you put water on for tea? I’m fine, but I’ve got another with me.”

“Another?”

Ripel repeated the word back to Kuze. A thin girl peeked her head out from behind Kuze’s back. Her clothes exposed much of her skin, and several thin, stringlike appendages poked out along her spine through the open back of her shirt.

She was not a minia. At the very least, for some odd reason, hands had been artificially added to her body.

The young girl smiled, with one eye remaining covered by her bangs.

“Good evening. It’s nice to meet you. Um, Ripel, was it?”

“…Yes, my name’s Ripel. My second name is Ripel the Frost Leaf. Um, you are…?”

“The Vortical Stampede.”

She unreservedly took a seat in the entryway and removed her long socks, which were wet with rain. The clergy-in-training Ripel averted her eyes at the sight of the girl’s exposed white legs stretching out from her shorts.

“Nihilo the Vortical Stampede. Kuze here is acting as my escort.”

“Her escort?”

“Basically, yeah. Lately, the donations haven’t been enough to keep the kids fed. *Bweh-heh-heh.* I’ve been picking up these sorts of jobs, too, as long as they don’t go against any of the teachings.”

“Mr. Kuze. Is that the whole story? Traveling around with a girl like this…”

“Oh? Is there a hint of jealousy in your voice, Ripel? I’m touched.”

“That’s not what’s going on here, okay? Would you like me to show you around, Nihilo?”

“Oh, no, don’t mind me. I have some things to discuss with Mr. Kuze here.”

Ripel’s eyes flicked back and forth between Kuze standing in the entryway and the seated Nihilo. A dull middle-aged man and a pretty young girl, shrouded in an otherworldly aura. The age gap between them was more than a dozen years.

“I knew it…”

“It’s just a joke, seriously! She really just asked me to be her bodyguard!”

“I know, I know. After all, you had no luck at all with that sort of stuff when you were living here.”

“*Bweh-heh-heh.* A little sad to hear you put it like that, honestly.”

Ripel looked at the sleeve of her work shirt and sighed.

“…I’ll go change. Look at me—I’m filthy.”

Watching the girl depart for the washroom, Nihilo spoke up suddenly.

“She’s a good girl.”

“How’d you know that? You just met her.”

“She didn’t ask about my body at all.”

Nihilo willfully and systematically swayed the spider-silk-like appendages extending from her back.

“Kids from all walks of life come to the Order. Even I used to be an orphan with no relatives before they took me in. Everyone understands that, so they don’t pry so long as you don’t mention it yourself.”

“Really? Now you talk like you do have relatives, though.”

“…Well, I do. The Order is my family.”

“*Hee-hee.* I’m jealous.”

The girl laughed, one eye still covered.

Nihilo the Vortical Stampede was not a minia.

There is a technique used by self-proclaimed Demon Kings that shares a resemblance to those used to breathe life into skeleton bones, where one works with the leftover flesh and organs of a fresh corpse to revive it as something yet different from when it was alive. Nihilo was a race of constructs known as a revenant—imprisoned as a war criminal in Aureatia, she was a *weapon* of mass destruction.

“You haven’t asked me about my origins, either, have you? Not once since we left Aureatia.”

Nihilo took a seat in one of the chairs by the entryway, swinging her bare legs back and forth. Kuze faced toward the shoe rack and looked over the low number of shoes collected within.

“Where’d that come from? Do you want me to ask?”

“What if I asked you to ask?”

The paladin scratched the back of his neck. Turning toward the girl, he bent down.

“Then naturally, I’d ask. I’m not officially a priest, but hearing confession is a duty of all who serve the Word-Maker.”

“It’s not that big a deal. I was just thinking that even though we’re on this trip together, we haven’t had a real opportunity to chat. If I said the *cargo in the heavy carriage* we brought from Aureatia was also me, would you believe me?”

Nihilo’s eye narrowed, and she stared out from the entryway.

In the distance, there was the sound of a bird’s wings flapping. The night in this frontier city was dark and very still.

“All I’ve heard is that you were kept prisoner back in Aureatia. I suppose you’ve paid for your crime if you’re out like this.”

“No.”

Nihilo shook her head.

“I’ve just been released on the condition that I help out Hidow. I love the minia races, after all.”

She was the weapon of a self-proclaimed Demon King who had perished long ago, once an enemy of Aureatia. A loser of the times, much in the same way Kuze of the Order was, she had negotiated with Hidow.

“Is that a joke?”

“Why do you say that? I was being perfectly honest.”

Kuze sat himself down on the cold floorboards beside Nihilo’s chair.

“All right, then, what if…there weren’t any conditions placed on you? What would you do?”

“I wonder. *Tee-hee.* I’d be fighting, probably. I was made to fight, after all, and it’s what I’m best at. What about you, Kuze?”

“If I didn’t need to fight anymore…I’d settle down at a church somewhere and maybe plant a vegetable garden. I’m really not cut out for this stuff…”

“No, you’re not suited for it.”

From atop her chair, Nihilo’s single eye looked down on Kuze. Despite being a reanimated corpse, the revenant’s highly refined eye was vibrant, clearer than any living creature’s.

“You felt a bit guilty talking with Ripel just now, too, didn’t you? I wonder if she knows that you go around disposing of the Order’s enemies.”

“Whoa, now…you’re embarrassing me. The person listening to confession isn’t supposed to be the one getting questioned.”

“You don’t carry any weapons, do you?”

The girl looked at Kuze’s gear, plopped down on the floor. It was a large shield, close to Kuze’s height in size, with an abstract angel design drawn on it. There were several nicks and scratches etched into its surface.

“…You seem like you’re actually scared of hurting other people.”

“Hey, come on. Try not to tease this frail old man too much.”

Kuze raised both his arms up in the air in a gesture of surrender as he remained seated on the floor.

“…That’s how it is, huh…? I look like that much of a pushover? From a girl built to be a weapon, I probably look pretty half-hearted about it.”

“Oh, no, not at all. Rather, I’m curious about the strength you must have had to survive this long with that mentality of yours. I mean, you also fought during the age of the True Demon King like I did, right? How many did you kill? How strong were the opponents you fought? What techniques did you use? Where did you learn them?”

“None of that stuff’s…really anything worth boasting about.”

Kuze gave a simple reply with a pallid, weak smile. He wasn’t looking at Nihilo but instead fixated on some point in the space in front of him.

“I just have an angel on my side… The angel’s watching me so I don’t die. That’s all… Really, that’s all there is to it.”

◆

The evening dining table was filled with much more color than what was normally present in the poorhouse.

Meat was divided up among everyone’s plates, and the bread wasn’t the normal hard, preserved stuff but soft bread that had been freshly baked that afternoon.

“Wow!”

“This soup’s clear like water! There’s sheep’s milk in it!”

“I told you, it’s because Mr. Kuze’s here!”

“Can I grab tomorrow’s portion, too?”

“Okay, everyone, quiet. If you keep being rowdy, this feast’ll disappear, too!”

Trying to calm down the children, each shouting over the next, Ripel glanced apologetically to Kuze.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Kuze… We’re poor, but you didn’t need to go out of your way…”

“It’s fine, it’s fine. All the churches need to look out for one another right now. Besides, I was never able to really act like a mentor for you, either.”

“……”

There was food left in front of Nihilo, but the undead girl called out to one of the surprised children and shared her bread.

“Here you go. Give the little girl there another piece, too. I ate something on our way here already.”

“Th-thank you, miss!”

“*Tee-hee*, you’re welcome.”

The child smiled, and Kuze smiled, too, looking on. He appeared nonchalant, but the smile itself seemed to be from the heart, unlike his usual ones, drained of all vitality.

“Hey, Ripel. You sure you didn’t need any help cleaning all the rooms for the merchants?”

“It was such a sudden request; you did a good job getting them prepared so quickly.”

“Ahhh, well…a little while ago, we had this Aureatia army troop encamped around here.”

Kuze’s and Nihilo’s ears both perked up at the mention of Aureatia. They had to make for the New Principality while disguised as having no association with Aureatia. However, there was coincidently another unit that had passed through this city, moving independently of the trading caravan.

“In that case, I’m sorry for piling more stress on you, then.”

“No, it’s fine. These merchants are much better behaved than the soldiers from Aureatia, and they don’t loudly stomp around, either, so you’re honestly doing me a big favor.”

Though all a part of the same force, the temperaments of Aureatia soldiers were different depending on who commanded them. For example, Twentieth Minister Hidow’s soldiers, disguised as merchants, were mostly from the upper class, like Hidow himself, and thus many were very well-mannered.

“What were those troops doing all the way out here? I’m intrigued.”

“Ummm…I’m not actually sure if this was true, but they mentioned putting down a dragon.”

“A dragon?” Nihilo reflexively echoed back.

Any dragon effortlessly dwarfed the average minia. And unlike wyverns, who evolved to form flocks, the term “Dragon” referred only to the progenitors—the true dragonkin. These transcendent beings were equipped with impenetrable dragon scales and Breath Word Arts of calamitous power.” Naturally, they were not something that normally could be put down *by the likes* of a minia army.

“The troops were under the command of Sixth General Harghent, of Aureatia’s Twenty-Nine Officials… I heard from the man himself they were going to kill the infamous Vikeon the Smoldering. Though I’m not sure if something like that’s even possible.”

“Kuze. Who’s Vikeon?”

“A black dragon from the age of legends. He’s reduced entire countries to ash.”

“That’s the one. I remembered him from one of the old stories you used to tell me, Mr. Kuze.”

“…Did I tell you about that stuff? Either way, that Sixth General fellow’s trying something absolutely absurd, isn’t he?”

One of the children, playing after finishing their dinner, poked Kuze in the shoulder, laughing.

“*Rawwwr!* My name is Vikeon! Fear me!”

"*Bweh-heh-heh.* If we're playing pretend dragon slaying, then shouldn't this old man play Vikeon?"

"Then who am I?"

"How about Rosclay the Absolute? Here we go! *Bwaaah!* Burn beneath my black smoke!"

"*Aaaah!* I won't give up! Rosclay is here!"

Watching Kuze join in on the children's games, Ripel sighed, a twinge of loneliness in her breath.

"Mr. Kuze hasn't changed one bit…"

"Hmm. He's always been like that?"

"Yeah… Laid-back, without any sense of dignity, and I've never seen him mad once. Even when shouldering the Order's troubles, he's always smiling…"

Ripel was unaware of what Kuze was going to be doing after he left—that he would try assassinating the New Principality's self-proclaimed Demon King, wielding his blade as a cleaner for the Order. Nor that now he was serving under Aureatia to give the orphans a passing flash of luxury in their lives.

Without saying a word, Nihilo decided to join Ripel and watch the black knight frolic about with the children.

The light of a candlestick flickered as if something passed it by, though no wind blew.

An angel, huh?

Suddenly, Kuze's words echoed in her mind.

◆

The night, once filled with children's voices, fell quiet again as they were put to bed.

Together, Kuze and Nihilo checked the corridor in front of their room.

"This hallway's the only route to your room. I had them give you one without a window, so I'll carry a couch over to this hallway and rest here. You should be safe for the night."

"You're always such a gentleman, Kuze. I don't have any problem sleeping together in the same room, you know."

As she flashed an alluring smile, the revenant's one uncovered eye glinted. The appendages on her back seemed both like slender threads of spider silk but also like eight individual arms in and of themselves.

"*Bweh-ha-ha.* You shouldn't tease old men like that. I'll be working hard tonight, too, so relax and get some sleep."

"If a dragon came by, could you protect me with that shield of yours?"

"…Impossible for me, I'd say."

Kuze gently shook his head and then stared hard at the empty air in front of him.

This habit of his had cropped up numerous times during their journey together.

"Though…even if I was face-to-face with Vikeon, I'd definitely win."

"*Tee-hee.* I hope so."

After his escort target returned to her room, Kuze began preparing to spend his night in the hallway. Covering the couch with a blanket, he lit a fire inside a big bottle, checking the contents of the tea and pitcher of water he had with him to stave off his nighttime hunger.

"…Yeah. I'm glad everyone looked to be doing well."

He seemed to be speaking to someone in the empty air, but no one was visible.

"Four years ago, I think. I was living here at the time. The fitting on the windows is just as bad as ever…"

Even after the death of the True Demon King, the Order that he tried to protect was fully on the path to ruin. There was only one option left for him to reverse course—escorting the transport of Nihilo the Vortical Stampede. Then he would be awarded a certain privilege as compensation for cooperation with the conquering of the New Principality of Lithia.

A fight to decide the sole Hero, eh…?

Kuze casually looked up. He could hear footsteps.

Turning his eyes toward the other end of the hallway, he saw Ripel, wrapped up in her shabby nightwear.

"What's wrong, Ripel? Why're you up so late?"

"…Mr. Kuze."

Turning toward Nihilo's room, Ripel approached Kuze.

"I have a favor to ask of you. Please save us."

"……And that's something you can't say in front of everyone else?"

He could tell from the serious look in the girl's eyes. He'd always planned on being there for the poorhouse, whether asked or not—as long as it was something Kuze himself could manage.

"Can you work with the New Principality?"

"……"

Kuze was silent.

The New Principality had cast a wide net. It was reasonable to believe they were reaching out far and wide. Similarly to how Aureatia had entreated Kuze for help.

"After the Sixth General's army traveled through here…people from the New Principality came out to investigate. They said that if we cooperated, they'd support our church! And that the kids wouldn't be kept awake by the freezing cold anymore! I can't fight, but you, Mr. Kuze…you're very strong, and…I'm sure that Master Taren will like you!"

"*…Bweh-ha-ha.* Really now."

She was still unaware that Kuze was working for Aureatia. She also thought that the merchants borrowing rooms in the poorhouse were entirely who they said they were.

“I really put you all through some terrible hardships during my absence. I’m so sorry, Ripel.”

She also had no idea Kuze was on a journey to assassinate that very leader of the New Principality, Taren the Punished.

“…I can’t help you. My method of saving you all won’t work that way… I’m truly sorry.”

“Mr. Kuze—”

Before the next words could escape her mouth, the sharp sound cut through the air, whishing by her earlobe.

It was an arrow. With his warrior’s intuition, Kuze had instinctively dodged the projectile.

“……!”

Kuze could tell that the ambusher hiding on the far side of the hallway, farther behind Ripel, had sniped at his head.

He could tell it was a spy Ripel had brought with her. The spy was looking to kill him. Kuze quickly dropped to the floor and picked up his angel-emblazoned shield.

“Wh-why…? Stop!” Ripel cried out, bewildered. “Don’t kill him!”

“You’re blocking my shot! That man’s connected to Aureatia!” the New Principality spy cruelly declared. As he spoke, he nocked his next arrow, drawing Kuze’s attention.

So the New Principality already knew about us. And their original aim wasn’t this transport unit, either. It’s because that Sixth General or whoever’s nonsense tipped these guys off and let their operatives get a foothold here… Dammit!

Even the sharp Hidow couldn’t have foreseen that there would be friction between their mission and the Sixth General’s independent troops. A shortcoming in the equal authority shared among Aureatia’s Twenty-Nine Officials and their ability to wield that authority at their own discretion.

From the outset, Kuze himself had proposed turning Ripel’s church orphanage into their base of operations.

“How awful can this world get…?!”

“The merchants are all in disguise, aren’t they, Kuze the Passing Disaster?!”

A dull metal clang echoed.

“Tch…!”

The spy who had approached Kuze from behind had his short sword deflected off Kuze’s right metal gauntlet.

Simultaneously, Kuze turned his great shield frontways, like a wall, and obstructed the archer’s line of sight.

“Mr. Kuze!” Ripel shouted. She wasn’t at fault. She had simply picked the best option available to protect those important to her. The exact same way Kuze the Passing Disaster had.

“I’m fine!”

Kuze shouted back as his shield took continuous archer fire. The short sword–wielding spy fixed his attacks on Kuze's organs, coming at him from his low blind spots like a snake. The fact that he was able to deal with two well-trained assassins working in tandem was a testament to how accustomed he was to fighting on the defensive.

Joining the two soldiers was yet another, approaching silently. Ripel, the person in charge of the facilities, had made connections with the New Principality. His opponents had been given ample opportunities to hide their forces within the orphanage.

"…Please. Don't kill him…!"

It was possible that the Aureatia soldiers on the upper floor would pick up on the disturbance and come rushing in. However, it was clear these opponents planned on capturing—or disposing of—Kuze and Nihilo before help could arrive.

"Whoa now!"

Cold sweat poured down Kuze as he fended off the fierce assault. He barely managed to dodge the short spear that pierced his defenses by letting it pass under his armpit. In the narrow corridor, the spies were having difficulties dealing with the great shield, well suited for location.

The short-spear soldier called back to his comrades.

"His defenses are strong. Better than regular Aureatia soldiers."

"…If the merchants on the floor above us are Aureatia soldiers, then we can't waste time. Forget capturing them alive."

"Affirmative."

Two were in the front. There were four more in the back. The attackers on both ends synchronized their encroaching thrusts toward Kuze. Standard tactics against an opponent with sturdy defenses—simultaneous saturation attacks that the defenses of a normal minia body weren't fast enough to handle.

It was the strategy Kuze wanted to see *least of all*.

"Crap."

The great shield shook. His gauntlets creaked. His light armor was shredded, and he used a kick to lock down a spearhead with the sole of his shoe.

With astounding reflexes for a lone minia, Kuze managed to protect himself. Nevertheless, one long sword evaded his defenses and reached his body.

Or at least, it should have.

The long sword–wielding soldier dropped to the ground.

"—"

His brothers-in-arms took caution, backing off together to widen the circle around Kuze. One of them assumed poison. Another thought the attack had come from a small, hidden weapon within Kuze's vestments.

Whatever the cause, the long sword–wielding soldier remained facedown on the ground, showing no sign of getting up.

Their compatriot was dead. All too suddenly.

"…What did I tell you? *Try* not *to kill them.*"

The cleaner gave a lifeless smile. At the very least, in the moment, he shouldn't have had any spare seconds to make an attack of his own.

"Open it up… Shoot at him from a distance," one of the soldiers muttered. They were trying to smother any creeping fear about the mysterious situation. The soldiers all nodded and began following the orders. Kuze feigned an insincere smile while hiding the cold sweat in his palms.

…Repeated projectile volleys should be enough to ward off with my shield. I just need to buy time…

As Kuze expected, the soldiers aimed their arrows toward their mark. Though instead of him, their bows were trained on Ripel, sitting in a corner of the hallway.

"…!"

Kuze jumped in front of the archer's aim to try and shield the girl.

The string snapped. Immediately beforehand, though, it was the archer who fell to the ground instead. The arrow, fired during a dying convulsion, lodged itself in the ceiling.

"Nastique…!"

Kuze muttered the name of someone who wasn't there. The short sword–wielding soldiers rushed in, not letting the moment Kuze's defenses were dropped pass. One of their blades was deflected by a gauntlet, but the remaining two soldiers also fell to the ground for some enigmatic reason.

"You bastard."

At this point, the spy unit's numbers had dropped to three.

It was eerie. The New Principality soldiers, well versed in assassination tactics, should have had a one-sided advantage, battling in a corridor with a positional edge, and they expected the flow to shift in their favor.

Both their relentless attacks, leaving no room for response, and their surprise follow-ups during lapses in their target's awareness, were being hindered by incomprehensible deaths, the cause a complete mystery. Kuze the Passing Disaster showed not a single wound on him.

"Bweh-heh-heh…"

"What's with this guy?"

His defensive techniques were top-of-the-line; that was without question. However, they weren't unfathomable skills, either. What about this lone paladin, considered to be the strongest of the Order's cleaners, was allowing him to do this?

"…Were you never taught? Didn't you heed the lessons in church when you were young?"

The bulwark great shield hid the Passing Disaster's body. Upon its surface was the impression of an angel.

Abstracted wings and light. A formless concept. Messengers from the heavens, spoken of in the Order's teachings, serving the Word-Maker as he gave birth to this world.

"When you do bad things…the angels come to punish you, you know?"

"G-gaaaah!"

Two of the remaining three charged forward in a panic. Kuze once again tried to suppress their attacks with his shield defense—when at that moment, the door to his flank opened. A figure jumped out.

The revenant girl sliced through one of the soldier's eyes with animalistic speed, then thrust the tentacles on her back into the other soldier's neck.

"Grrrng, hrngh."

At the behest of the metal terminals digging into Nihilo's nervous system, he involuntarily threw his short sword toward the remaining soldier. The blade sank into the head of the fleeing man, killing him instantly. His final action over, he then stopped breathing himself.

The whole exchange had been like one flowing stroke of a brush, over in the blink of an eye.

"*Tee-hee.* That was a close one, Kuze. Are you okay?"

"……"

With the battle complete, Kuze looked over the tragic scene splayed across the hallway. He surveyed the dead… Neither the soldiers torn to grizzly pieces nor the ones looking peacefully asleep would ever taste life again.

His unattainable wish to save lives like these was an example of Kuze's insolence.

"…Yeah. Thanks, Nihilo."

"You're welcome."

He then turned toward the remaining person in the hall.

Still sitting on the ground, Ripel was covering her face.

"I'm sorry…I'm sorry, Mr. Kuze. I really just, I wanted…I wanted you to join our cause. I never wanted them to k-kill—"

"I know. This was all those New Principality guys' idea. You haven't done anything wrong, Ripel. You were just trying to keep the orphans fed. I wanted to do the same."

"And y-yet, I…"

"…Who ordered you to do this?"

"A woman…Lana the Moon Tempest… She said she wanted me to tell her if Kuze the Passing Disaster came… That's why I heard about the encampment, too…"

Kuze the Passing Disaster was known throughout the underworld as the Order's strongman. Talents unaffiliated with Aureatia. This was the sort of condition the New Principality was after.

Kuze gritted his teeth. He understood that Ripel remaining on the floor… and her trembling voice weren't merely products of fear and guilt.

“…Ripel. Can you let me see your stomach?”

“I’m sorry. *Koff, koff…*”

“Looks like her kidneys are run through.”

Nihilo gave her dispassionate diagnosis. A stray arrow during the close-quartered melee was stuck deep in Ripel’s abdomen.

The power that haunted Kuze would only protect Kuze himself. And those without such power were painfully weak in comparison.

“……If everyone was happy…I wanted to be…like you, Mr. Kuze…”

“Ripel…I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

The Order was a dying institution. Used up and cast aside.

Kuze the Passing Disaster could be present only to watch people die.

◆

Ripel was buried the next day.

“Nihilo, you died once, right?” Kuze began, looking down on the white grave bathed in the morning sun.

“…There’s one thing I’d like to ask you. When you died, did you see an angel?”

“The angels the Order talks about can’t be seen with the eyes, and they don’t speak to people, either, right? Not just that, but the Order’s teachings don’t say anything about angels coming to greet you when you die, either. I’m pretty sure that’s nothing but a fantasy someone tacked on.”

“Well…yeah, you got a point. I think the same thing, to tell you the truth.”

Kuze gazed at the empty air, up to the blue sky those angels looked down from.

“Still, the angels are real.”

At the end of his gaze was one. An angel only Kuze could perceive.

Pure-white hair. Pure-white clothes. Pure-white wings.

Her soft, short hair and slender physique were almost like a young boy’s. Her expression rarely changed. Even Kuze himself knew nothing for certain about what she was thinking or why she clung to Kuze’s side.

“…You know, I think even angels get lonely.”

It was at the time of creation—when numerous Visitors came and this world began—that the Word-Maker’s authority to manage the world had been distributed among the angels. When the time of creation ended, their purpose ended with it, and they’d faded with the march of time… It was possible the people had stopped trying to see them for themselves.

The lost angels, even within the teachings of the Order, existed only in legends, passed down over generations.

“Kuze, have you…”

Nihilo followed Kuze’s eyes. She saw nothing, only empty air.

“…been looking at an angel this whole time?”

“Bweh-heh-heh. I wonder.”

It was clear the angel commanded power over death. The short sword she carried in her hand, Death's Fang, was a deadly enchanted blade, capable of bringing swift death with the smallest scratch.

"…Either way, the angels are watching over us."

The angel hadn't saved anyone else. She had killed those who'd tried to kill Kuze.

That was why Kuze didn't carry a weapon. An attempt to stop the angel he believed in from killing others. He chose to fight solely by keeping death at arm's length with his great shield. The purpose of his shield was to *protect his enemies*.

"If you don't believe that, then they won't be able to save you, see."

The average person was sure to dismiss it all as the delusion of a religious fanatic. Nevertheless, it was this impossible abnormality alone that made Kuze the Passing Disaster invincible.

"Does it have a name?"

"…Name?"

Nihilo turned toward Kuze, her hands locked together behind her back.

"I'm talking about the angel's name. If you can see an angel, then it has to have a name, right?"

"*…Bweh-heh-heh.* I see. This stuff's kind of embarrassing… I've never told anyone before."

He hadn't even told Ripel, now asleep beneath the soil.

"Sure does. Her name's…"

She was never once perceived by the people of this world, with one exception.

She was discarnate and incorporeal, unable to be meddled with by any means whatsoever.

She wielded an absolute authority to end life, held continuously from the time of creation.

An incarnation of fated death, who merely arrived in silence and stole everything while remaining completely unseen.

The Hallowed Cutthroat.

Nastique the Quiet Singer.

ISHURA

Keiso

ILLUSTRATION BY Kureta

Second Verse:

THE NEW DEMON KING WAR

CHAPTER 11 Predetermined Destiny

It was afternoon. An aristocratically dressed young man wearing a wide-brimmed hat to the side arrived in front of the fortress, with the guard on watch giving him a uniform bow.

“Master Hidow. We’ve been expecting you!”

“Thank you for making it all the way out here to the frontier, Twentieth Minister.”

“No need for formalities. The stiff greetings grate on my nerves.”

He dismissed them with a wave of his palm. Hidow the Clamp was nearly the same age as either of the gatekeepers’ sons, but his position among the Twenty-Nine Officials of Aureatia meant that, despite his age, he was at the top of the country’s government.

The home of this giant fortress, Mage City, was the closest satellite city to Taren’s New Principality of Lithia and served as the frontline castle for Aureatia from which to observe the movements of newly independent Lithia.

“Have our guests arrived?”

“Yes. They arrived this morning.”

“I’m running late, then, huh? Ah well, those Visitors don’t really care much for manners, do they?”

“Hard to say. I’ve heard they each have their own sense of things.”

Climbing the stairs and opening the first door he came to, he saw two minia were already seated inside.

More accurately, one sat properly in a chair. The other was seated on the floor, his legs crossed.

“Sorry for being late when I’m the one who summoned you here. Twentieth Minister Hidow the Clamp.”

“U-um…”

The young girl sitting in the chair quickly jumped to her feet and gave a deep bow. Her body was rigid with nerves.

She appeared badly wounded. One of her eyes was hidden behind a bandage.

“My name is Yuno the Distant Talon. In Nagan…um, in the ruined Nagan City, I was a scholar-in-training. Thank you very much for generously taking the time to speak—”

“It’s fine, it’s fine, save your introductions. A new Visitor in the world isn’t something Aureatia can afford to ignore. Thank you for letting us know.”

“Please… I—I don’t need any gratitude.”

“Now then.”

After making the young girl take her seat again, Hidow turned a wary eye toward the man sitting cross-legged on the floor.

—Visitors. Foreign deviants cast out from their world, easily capable of toppling all the knowledge, laws, and preexisting concepts of this world. Close to half of the self-proclaimed Demon Kings throughout history had been Visitors.

Conversely, they also brought benefits. For instance, they popularized muskets and introduced the concept of snipers and skirmishing troops. They brought the engineering techniques to turn this world's radzio crystals into communication devices. Another example was the minia races' unified measurement system, based on the "metric system" they had borrowed from the Visitors.

"So that's the Willow-Sword, eh?"

"C'mon… You *gotta* add that stuff on? I'm Soujirou."

"Not a bad second name, if you ask me. The little lady over there give you that, too?"

The young civil servant's mouth broke into a smile, turning his chair backward before sitting. He took a seat close to Soujirou on the floor, looking down over him.

Soujirou's reptilian eyes rolled up to look at the minister.

"Our enemy is the former Twenty-Third General Taren the Punished. She's put together a wyvern army and collected mercs and magic items from every corner of the whole damn world. Before Aureatia and the New Principality go to war—and before each city's civilians get caught up in the conflict—I want things settled quickly. And I want you two to do it."

Naturally, there was a reason the largest nation of the minia races was delaying their enemy's trade and trying to get a handle on their internal affairs.

They wanted to delay open hostilities and to convince their enemy they'd fall if it came to outright conflict. Aureatia's strategy was to pretend they were avoiding any preemptive strikes to retain their moral high ground, while actually using assassination to make the first move.

"What, so you mean this game to choose a Hero ain't starting yet?"

"That's more than half a year away. Aureatia's the largest nation in our world. Naturally, participation in such a grand event will require an equal amount of prestige. Understand what I'm getting at?"

There were an endless number of people who were confident in their strength and had declared themselves as candidates for the Imperial Competition.

This Soujirou here was another of these Hero candidates. Just like Kuze the Passing Disaster.

"This'll be the test to see if you've got skill worthy enough for candidacy —the *preliminaries*, if you will. If you're able to make big moves against the New Principality, then one of the Twenty-Nine Officials will sponsor you. That, I can guarantee."

"Doesn't make a difference to me as long as I get some fun fights out of it. Who they got?"

“Safe to assume you can *kill* them, then?”

Seated next to Soujirou, Yuno looked extremely on edge and furiously whispered something.

“S-Soujirou, Hidow is a really, really important person! You need to be more polite, okay?”

“Huh? Then whaddaya want me to say?”

“Ummm…let’s see… Allow me to express my deepest gratitude for concerning yourself with a wandering Visitor like me, or…just don’t be so rude…”

“Okay,” Soujirou lazily replied, his mouth hanging open. Pointing at Yuno with his thumb, he again addressed Hidow.

“Can we keep going and pretend I said all that?”

“I heard all of that, you know. You two would’ve been in a lot of trouble with anyone else.”

Hidow chuckled. Since acquiring his position among the Twenty-Nine Officials, there were fewer and fewer people with whom he could openly converse like any other young man his age.

However, Soujirou’s status as a Visitor, guaranteeing his abilities, was the only thing allowing such impudence. Hidow the Clamp had bestowed charity on Kuze the Passing Disaster on a whim, but he wasn’t especially tolerant of rebellious individuals, either. Though lionized as a genius by the citizens, he was aware as one of the Twenty-Nine that there was a fundamental line he couldn’t cross.

“Yuno. I also know this fight has some importance to you, too, actually. Have you been up front about that with Soujirou?”

“Yes. Um…”

Yuno glanced to Soujirou beside her.

“*Hmm?* What?”

“You…didn’t forget, did you…?”

“Yeah. I ain’t that smart, see. I been leaving mosta the negotiating and guiding to you, right?”

“…Hey, you sure this guy’s okay?”

“Yes. I promise he’s very skilled… Very, very skilled…”

Seated next to the yawning Soujirou on the floor, Yuno spoke as if she was mainly trying to convince herself. The hellish sight of Nagan’s ruination had been neither illusion nor a bad dream. Nevertheless, looking at Soujirou’s moronic nature, she couldn’t help but feel like his horrifying and ghoulish swordsmanship had actually been a lie.

“Um, Master Hidow. This self-proclaimed Demon King Taren… Is the information that one of her subordinates was there that day at the Great Labyrinth true?”

“It is. You have the right to know the truth.”

Hidow’s smile disappeared, and for the first time, he looked Yuno straight in the eyes.

“His name is Dakai the Magpie. The innermost part of the Great Labyrinth housed a valuable magic item…the Cold Star that served as that monstrosity’s power source. Dakai traversed the labyrinth all on his own and stole it.”

“…That’s the same day I killed that giant dungeon thing, huh? So someone else was there.”

“We don’t know exactly why the Dungeon Golem started moving…but it’s possible this Dakai man…activated it when he set foot in the labyrinth’s innermost chamber. That’s what you’re saying, then?”

“This is purely my own speculation.”

Yuno lowered her eyes. She continued seeking targets for her vengeance, much like she had with Soujirou.

She didn’t want that day’s tragedy to be written off as a simple disaster. Her desire to pin the responsibility on someone was intense. It was a twisted sort of hope. Even a young girl like Yuno knew it.

But if I gave up my search, what am I supposed to do?

—Was she supposed to accept that nothing could’ve been done—that it wasn’t someone else’s fault *but her own for being too weak to stop the tragedy*—and continue down life’s proper path, having come to terms with the tragedy?

“Master Hidow. How exactly…”

Yuno was a powerless young girl, on the outside of Aureatia’s strategic operations. Nevertheless, she had a question.

“…did you come to find out this information? Is this reliable enough to be considered factual…?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t press that point any further if I were you. Understand?”

“…Okay.”

She imagined, for example, that there was a collaborator on the other side. Whether or not assassination would bring about the most ideal situation or if Taren had a body double or powerful next-in-line—the answers to such questions were things Aureatia needed to look into ahead of time.

This was what making an enemy of the world’s largest nation-state entailed.

“Is my word not enough for you?”

“No. I… Please forgive my misgivings.”

What did Soujirou think about this? She didn’t give him a second thought. Having lost everything meant she was free.

If this Dakai man was the rightful recipient of Yuno’s and Lucelles’s hatred, then she felt it necessary to ask him about it directly.

“I’ll go, too.”

“Why not? Let’s go for it.”

Hidow earnestly listened to the words of the commoner girl, far removed from his station.

CHAPTER 12 Suspicion

By the time Regnejee had returned to the central spire that day, Curte's room was cloaked in darkness. She herself had no need for light to begin with, so the faint glimmer was only to signal her presence to Regnejee. At that specific moment, however, she was having dinner with Taren.

Immediately after entering the room through the window like usual, Regnejee stopped in midair.

"Don't move," he snarled.

There was a presence in the room. A presence he knew wasn't Curte's.

"Move, and I'll kill you."

"It's me," a familiar voice replied.

Dakai the Magpie—a knavish and enigmatic Visitor who had long worked as Taren's right hand in the shadows. Regnejee despised him.

"No need to steel yourself for a fight—c'mon. I'm mid-investigation, see. Miss Taren gave me permission."

"I don't remember giving you mine. Nor do I plan on being buddy-buddy with a foolish swordsman like you."

"Swordsman, huh? *Ha-ha-ha!* What a coincidence. I don't see myself getting along well with a wyvern like you, either."

Within the dark room, Dakai made a show of putting both hands in the air. Naturally, he was capable of switching to the offensive even in a pose like this. This man of superhuman ability was capable of controlling every part of his body, down to his two bare feet, as sublimely as the tips of his fingers and faster than the high-speed Word Arts invocations on which Regnejee prided himself.

Dakai blurted out a question, his eyes still not directed at the wyvern's.

"Do you know about the diary?"

"…Diary?"

"Are diaries not that popular in this world? You write down a daily record in a notebook. Did you know Curte was writing in one of those?"

Regnejee knew. She had mentioned recording her memories together with Regnejee.

"Not at all. So that's what these minia fools do to pass the time."

"Really? Seems like Curte truly enjoyed herself with it, though."

Dakai didn't move but instead used his eyes to indicate a book sitting on the desk. He had been reading it moments prior. Regnejee settled on the window frame and glared at Dakai and the book.

"What is that?"

"There are no letters written in here. Holes punched open in set intervals so you can read what's written by passing your hands over them. Your little princess put down the time you spent talking together, the

weather outside… What are we gonna do if she actually marked that stuff down in here? You didn't think she could record that stuff, either, did you?"

"……"

How could she write down words when she couldn't even see…?

After the wyvern troops had finished their sorties, Regnejee always returned to this room and chatted with Curte. Since she was completely blind, he would tell her the time of day and what the scenery outside looked like.

The days they sortied and the times they returned to their nests. If the enemy's forces acquired information of that magnitude, they could then extrapolate the time needed to counter their aerial defense network.

"That said, you're not careless enough to talk about the full extent of our forces, right? Aureatia's side should have scouted that information out already. There must be a main culprit they dispatched here to set up this scheme."

"What about it?"

The wyvern leader's anger intensified. With his heightened intelligence, he picked up on what Dakai was implying—the true identity of the informant Dakai was investigating.

"Just try…laying a hand on Curte. I'll cut you into nine pieces."

"Whoa now."

Dakai gave a weak laugh and turned a sidelong glance toward Regnejee.

"You feel like you have a chance against me?"

"Fool."

Regnejee spread his wings, and with the action came a loud buzzing sound, decidedly *not wyvern in nature*.

He observed the Visitor before him. He had no weapon in either of his raised hands. Regnejee considered if his Thermal Arts incantation would be faster than the man's hands reaching for the enchanted sword on Dakai's hip.

No…

He couldn't glean Dakai's true intentions from his expression. When it came to acts of deception and exposing the truth, there was no greater monster in the New Principality of Lithia than the man in front of him.

"Say, Regnejee, there's a question I've had for a long time. That flock of yours… What's up with it anyway?"

"…What about my flock?"

"Your flock got wiped out by the True Demon King once before, right? The same time Curte lost her eyesight… That was just four years ago. How did your flock *grow so much* in just four years?"

"What would a minia worm like you do with that information?"

The man was always in long-sleeve black clothes. It was possible there were assassin's projectiles hidden up those sleeves and Regnejee had simply never seen them before. Cheap tricks Regnejee could easily deal with from an ordinary soldier could prove lethal if executed by Dakai.

For example, Dakai's bare feet seemed to be floating slightly above the carpet. If he was hiding a tiny wood chip or something similar under them, he might use it to pierce Regnejee's throat before the wyvern could fly away. A projectile hurled with Dakai's leg strength, even a tiny splinter of wood, was capable of becoming a deadly weapon.

Even before any of that, though, Regnejee's perception of the man's reaction speed was that it would always surpass his own. If Dakai could touch the hilt of his enchanted sword with his fingertips before Regnejee finished his incantation, then his response would be impossibly fast. Thus, the wyvern contemplated using his final trump card then and there.

"You…"

Seeing Regnejee open his mouth, Dakai slowly lowered his hands.

"Calm down. I don't plan on doing anything yet. Not to you or to Curte."

"If you want to interrogate Curte, then I'll be there as witness."

"*Ha-ha.* Look, there's no point to that anyway. Any spy who's given everything to set up a plan this daring isn't going to disclose a thing, no matter what we do—"

The bandit shrugged.

"And even if someone tricked her into doing this, it's not like she saw *who* it was."

Waving his hand behind him, Dakai disappeared. It was as if he'd melded into the night.

Left behind, Regnejee silently looked down at Curte's diary.

Glancing over the cover, he recalled the image of the young girl's smiling face, happily relaying the contents of the journal back to him.

…I won't throw it away.

The flock he led had been turned into a military force and could no longer return to life in the wild. They needed the New Principality's protection.

His responsibility for his flock's survival? Or his sole source of tranquility in the world?

I'm making the right choice. Always.

◆

Soup simmered with beans, wheat, and a variety of spices. Freshly smoked horse meat. Piping hot rice porridge. Raw vegetables in a fruit-and-honey dressing. And finally, white wine obtained from the faraway Itarky Highlands.

Taren the Punished was not at all the type of general who enjoyed the finer things in life, but when it came time to share a meal with her adopted daughter, she always made sure to prepare a repast more befitting her station.

Gourmet food was one of the joys Curte could still appreciate, even having lost her eyesight.

“And then…when Regnejee went to leave, his legs got caught on my shawl. Isn’t that awful? I mean, I couldn’t even see where it went. I spent so much time searching my room.”

“Quite a disaster indeed. It’s Regnejee, after all. I’m sure he was brazenly defiant about it all, too, yes? Just forgive him.”

“Oh, I know. *Tee-hee.*”

Taren carved up and distributed the smoked meat to Curte’s plate. Curte noticed and skillfully cut the serving with her fork and knife before bringing it to her mouth.

Taren didn’t particularly mean to dote on Curte, but whenever she watched the girl’s everyday behavior, her table etiquette, manner of walking, the way she went up and down the stairs or got into the bath, her heart filled with admiration.

Curte was a girl with an exceptional memory. When it came to memorizing and reproducing the things she was taught, it wasn’t an exaggeration to call her ability to absorb new information superhuman.

She had been able to recover from the True Demon King’s terror, debilitating her mind and body and throwing her into madness, to the degree she had due to this strength with which she was blessed, allowing her to reconstruct her daily life.

“……This is tasty.”

“I’m glad. Things are going well…”

A smile accompanied her brief reply. During the age of the True Demon King, when Taren was Curte’s age, she had already been a common soldier, fighting a war. The food rations were pitiful, and she remembered swearing to herself that if she ever gave birth to a child, she would make sure they never experienced such hunger. Her injuries in battle, however, meant this wish of hers could never be granted.

The era of war. The era of madness. Now, with the True Demon King gone, were the minia races finally free from such curses?

“Hey, Mom.”

“How many times have I told you? Don’t call me that. It’s rude to your real mother.”

“…Okay… I wanted to ask you not to make Regnejee do anything dangerous.”

“Well, given his duties, he’s always in danger. Is there something in particular that’s worrying you?”

“…Is war going to start again?”

“It looks likely. I’m a self-proclaimed Demon King. Aureatia’s…the kingdom’s never spared those who have declared themselves Demon King. They move to subjugate them without exception. In which case, it’s my duty to defend this city.”

This, too, was the forward-facing attitude she showed to her people. Taren didn’t plan on elevating their fight to some noble cause. Otherwise, it would be impossible to win against an enormous power like Aureatia.

“Aureatia is a minia-supremacist nation that’s persisted from the age of kingdoms. If Lithia yields to them…”

Regnejee and his flock’s way of life would be lost to them.

Curte and Regnejee had always been together, ever since Taren first discovered the pair. Curte believed Regnejee was an angel who saved people. The belief was precisely why the sighted Taren would never reveal Regnejee’s true form to the girl.

He was a wyvern, a predator of the minia, and impossible to coexist with.

“It’s okay; I know. I’m just acting spoiled, but…”

Curte brought her spoon to her mouth. She hadn’t made much headway on her meal.

“I wanted to know if you really only gave Regnejee and me shelter just to fight for you, Mom.”

“My answer’s the same as always. You both hold decisive tactical value, and there was no other reason than that. You shouldn’t call me ‘Mom.’”

It was exactly as she stated. Taren, as a general, was using Curte and the wyvern accompanying her for his military might. No matter how strong a parental bond the two might develop, as long as the relationship began under that premise, she would never truly be the girl’s mother.

“…I hope…we can be happy…”

“You and Regnejee?”

“And you as well, Mo—Master Taren. If the war is won, Lithia prospers… and becomes safe. I hope everyone will be able to live happy lives here…”

“There’s no need to worry. I’m the undefeated general Taren the Punished. I’ll be sure to put an end to this petty squabble with Aureatia in a flash.”

Seeing Curte’s tiny yawn, Taren gently supported her and brought her to her feet.

“You should go to bed for today. You’re harboring too much anxiety in that delicate heart of yours.”

“Okay. Good night…Mom.”

“You just said it again, Curte,” replied Taren with a smile Curte couldn’t see, forlorn and unbecoming of a general like her. That fact was Taren’s saving grace.

“Good night, Master Taren.”

“Much better. Good night.”

CHAPTER 13 Sudden Change

The streets of Lithia, narrow passageways crowded with merchant stalls, were like a maze expanding out from the central stronghold.

The numerous spires rising up into the sky overwhelmed the tiny Kia, finely reflecting the sunlight.

“…Whatever! This isn’t as impressive as I thought it would be!” she purposefully pointed out to Elea who walked beside her.

“Really now?”

“There are even bigger trees back in Eta. And the fruit here isn’t *that* fresh, either. Minia cities are nothing but cramped streets and noise.”

High above them, not balloons but a wyvern formation cut across the sky. This scene, unthinkable in any other minia city, failed to capture Kia’s attention as much as the spread of vegetables and fruits in the city shops. Kia looked more like an innocent young girl her age than usual, her eyes sparkling at seeing the minia hustle and bustle for the first time.

“*Hee-hee.* Aureatia is even more impressive.”

“Lies, lies, and more…”

Startled by the carriages weaving through the intervals between shops, Kia’s sentence trailed off. She looked up at Elea and corrected herself.

“…You’re definitely lying.”

“Oh? Your teacher wouldn’t lie to you.”

Elea the Red Tag’s reasoning for the visit to Lithia was not sightseeing and definitely had nothing to do with Kia’s education. An omnipotent and ultimate Word Arts user—the World Word’s existence was her sole and greatest trump card, ensuring victory in the upcoming Imperial Competition.

She needed to eliminate anyone who could link Elea and Kia together before the start of the match.

After Aureatia’s assassination plot succeeds, our undercover agents will return to their country. Once that happens, it’ll be hard to deceive the others and kill them. I may be pushing my luck, but if I can dispose of them at this stage, then…

The two finally arrived at a small park away from the busy streets. In the middle was a slightly crumbling artificial fountain, with the surrounding hedges just high enough to shield them from the eyes of passersby.

The spy meeting them there that day had provided them with the date, time, and this location, using another soldier as an intermediary.

“So? Who are you meeting here anyway?”

“An old friend of mine. We’ll be talking awhile.”

“…Well, either way, it’d be boring to be stuck back at the inn all alone! I’m *definitely* not studying, either, got it?!”

“Are you that lonely without me? *Tee-hee.* Quite the handful, aren’t you?”

“I’ve told you to stop treating me like a little kid!”

Kia accompanying her to this meeting was a begrudging turn of events for Elea, but the time they spent waiting together was never boring and filled with conversation.

The breeze flowing from the canal had a subtle salty scent to it. Elea assumed it was because they were close to the river mouth, which continued on to the sea.

After sitting for a while on one of the park benches, they heard someone call out from beside them.

“…You’re early, Elea.”

It was a woman wearing a hooded cloak that hid her profile. She was extremely short, however—no taller than a child.

She was an undercover agent for Aureatia, Lana the Moon Tempest.

Lana was the very person who had sold out Lithia agents knowledgeable of the World Word’s location to Elea, giving Elea the opportunity to infiltrate Kia’s village.

While rumors about the World Word had flowed through the New Principality’s intelligence network, no one seriously believed in the existence of an omnipotent and all-powerful Word Arts user. Besides Lana the Moon Tempest, no one else knew the truth behind the hunt for the World Word, and though she was the sole person who could connect Elea and Kia, she remained unaware that the girl in front of her was, indeed, the World Word herself.

For now.

“…What? You’re one of her students, too?”

“Well, something like that. I used to be. My name is Lana the Moon Tempest. Nice to meet you.”

Lana smiled and patted the elf on the head.

Although she and the other agents within Lithia were currently under the chain of command of operational headquarters, led by Hidow in Mage City, she had originally been a member of an assassin squad overseen by Elea.

“Quite the cutie. What’s your name?”

“…Kia.”

“Hmmmm. Okay then, Kia, do you want to go sightseeing with me? Better than your uptight and boring teacher here, right?”

“Whatever… Not like there’s anything special in this town anyway.”

“There’s a huge ship. Lithia’s a canal city, after all. It’s a sightseeing boat; most other cities don’t have any of those.”

“A ship…?!”

“And for food, well, the spices available here allow for some really tasty options. There’s also food you eat with rice. It’s a bit different from bread, but it’s pretty dang good.”

“I—I see…”

Kia’s ambiguous nod appeared to stem from her self-consciousness in front of Lana. Her feisty spirit from before had disappeared as she meekly muttered—

“Well, if you insist, then…sure, I guess…”

“That settles it, then. Let’s get going.”

“Lana.”

“I know.”

Lana stretched her body up and brought her mouth close to Elea’s ear.

“On paper, my reason for being here is to act as a guide.”

“…When’s the hunt supposed to start?”

“Soon. We’ve acquired our *prized* prey. Many agents were killed, but all the better, since I was able to cut any threads leading back to me. I can soon hand over all the wyvern sortie records, too.”

“……”

“For my work here, I made sure to only find two skilled warriors. Higuare the Pelagic and Shalk the Sound Slicer. Of course, if the assassination cleans things up, we won’t need to worry about clashing with them. Also, in the event the plot fails, we can sow internal strife between the mercenaries. That’s a good way to lure them to our side.”

Aureatia’s Seventeenth Minister reflected for just a moment. At this point, Lana’s operation was progressing smoothly. It wouldn’t be advisable to dispose of her right away.

She needed to time her move to line up just before Aureatia made their own and have Lana continue executing the original strategy until then. Then, just as they set out to leave from Lithia, she would have Lana go missing. By the time any investigation got back to Elea outside the city, the chaos from Taren’s assassination would sweep it all under the rug.

“Understood. Is it all right if I come with you?”

“…I don’t care. You can go back to the inn if you want.”

“*Ha-ha.* You don’t get it, Kia. She may not look it, but your teacher gets lonely, too, right?”

“It seems you haven’t fixed those loose lips of yours, Lana.”

“What? That’s what makes me so good at my job.”

“I’m grateful for you, Elea.”

Lana smiled affably—not the guileful smile of a spy but of someone who truly felt those words from the bottom of her heart.

◆

“Kia, are you awake? Sleepy?”

“*Mmnh…* I’m totally…fine…”

“She’s a goner.”

Kia rode on Elea’s back, looking totally worn out from all the fun.

It was evening. The line of the market's lamps formed a path. Though not to the same degree as Aureatia, this was an economically bountiful city, animated and with rows of after-hours stalls and all-night lamps.

"…General Taren seems to be quite the statesman."

"Pretty much. Probably all the more reason why she feels so responsible and like she has to do everything herself. If she was just a little less popular, things wouldn't have ended up like this."

"You think so?"

"Being here so long made me understand. Lithia's independence and Taren declaring herself ruler started because her citizens wanted it that way. She fits the role. They wanted their own country. Hell, maybe that's just how all the self-proclaimed Demon Kings started out."

There were those with more outstanding intellect than Aureatia's Twenty-Third General. More popular and more martially skilled individuals, too.

However, she was certainly the only one among them capable of breaking free from Aureatia's structure and keeping a nation moving all on her own.

"…Did you hear what those guys at the tavern said? Everyone thinks a war with Aureatia is going to be a party or something. They assume they're going to win with the unbeatable Taren and her unequaled wyvern army. The battle reaching their front door isn't even a possibility to them."

"If I were General Taren, I'd probably look to quickly topple Mage City in the flatlands. If she used that as a foothold to build a wide-reaching air-defense network with her wyverns, then with Aureatia forced to advance by land, they'd lose their way to make their advance."

"Huh. That's some impressive strategic talk coming from a civil servant."

"There were a number of things Taren taught me. Though I was never able to properly thank her for any of it."

"Ah-ha-ha! A little late for sympathies, isn't it? If we don't kill her, we'll have full-scale war. With the True Demon King finally dead, there's nothing to gain from such a conflict. She needs to disappear, no matter what."

"…You're right."

Lana, too, had previously stained her own hands with many a dirty job as a member of the spy guild Obsidian Eyes. She betrayed the organization she had once belonged to, ending up in Aureatia.

"Well, this job'll be over soon. I'm going to take it easy back in Aureatia. Work as a city guide for real this time, see…"

The two women continued exchanging conversation as they walked along the illuminated streets of Lithia. Wyverns soared overhead, with a few of the residents occasionally looking up to watch them.

Minia races and dragonkin coexisting. If that was truly possible, who knew how many people's lives it would save. If Taren the Punished had performed her duties as a general without being driven mad by her ideals and sense of duty, there might have been lives she could have saved.

The surrounding sights began to grow dark, and shortly after Elea sat Kia down in a shop chair to rest the girl's heavy eyelids, Lana declared she was going to buy a toy for Kia, leaving their side.

Naturally, Elea tailed her. She couldn't let Lana the Moon Tempest out of her sight.

"……!"

Along the way, she turned a corner and immediately hid herself in the shadow of a large stockpile of goods. She was following after Lana but could now see two silhouettes on the far side of the alley.

"…So, according to Taren, there's an informant among us, apparently."

"Is there now? Why're you telling me that, Dakai?"

It was a man in butler garb, his black hair dyed at the tips and with a hawkish glint in his eyes. His prim appearance made it easy to mistake him for a woman at first glance. With a mysterious curved sword brandished in one hand, he was blocking Lana from moving forward.

"What if I told you that it was little Curte? What then?"

"Then that'd be quite the scandal, wouldn't it…? Taren's own adopted daughter leaking info."

"That girl keeps a diary. Hard to believe, isn't it? We had a similar sort of writing system back in the Beyond where I'm from. A system that allowed even blind people to read and write… We called it braille."

"……"

"Really clever idea, don't you think? No one would ever guess a blind girl was recording information and leaking it to the enemy. A fantastic alibi, too. You were outside the city the whole time searching after mercenaries like Higuare and Shalk, right? So while you were gone, *you had Curte record things in your stead*."

Curte of the Fair Skies was in the sole, privileged position of being the one besides Taren herself who was given direct information regarding the day's movements from the wyvern commander. Furthermore, as long as one had the boldness and confidence of Lana the Moon Tempest, disguising oneself as the girl's servant or teacher to get closer to her would be an easy feat.

"After that, you copied over the contents of her diary…and then you could simply deliver it to someone on the outside. In the worst-case scenario, you could pin the crime on Curte, and it'd still end up as a glorious work of discord-sowing espionage."

The man called Dakai spoke with firm conviction in his tone. He was confident he outdid Lana on all fronts, both in battle and when it came to his insight.

"A former member of the spies guild like you has definitely created ciphers using layouts of punched holes, right? With Curte's sharp memory, it must've been easy to have her retain everything, too."

"Listen, you've made a great many claims, but where is your proof?"

“The transcript. After returning to Lithia, you collected it with the braille typing machine, right? However…unlike with the braille machine, you couldn’t just toss it over to someone on the outside to dispose of.”

Dakai pulled out a bundle of pages from his coat pocket, and Lana shrank at the sight of them. The pale light from the night lamps reflected eerily on the cold sweat running down Lana’s brow.

“…How?”

“*How?!* You mean, how did I find your hiding spot?! Ha-ha-ha-ha! C’mon now—you’re gonna ask a bandit that?! There isn’t any lock I can’t open, and there definitely isn’t any hiding spot I can’t find. You’re gonna ask the guy who conquered the Great Nagan Labyrinth a question like that?”

“Dammit, with just a little bit more time…!”

“You know, I say this to Taren a lot, too—”

His technical proficiency was on another level. No matter how adeptly the most elite intelligence agents of Aureatia hid themselves, it could never contend with the skills of an otherworldly deviant. Thus was the Visitors’ power.

“Don’t I do a great job?”

Watching Lana’s whole plot be revealed in the open made Elea’s heart pound like an alarm bell. She was lucky this Visitor hadn’t noticed her and that she hadn’t caught up to Lana by the time he made contact.

No, that’s not it. This isn’t lucky at all.

It was now uncertain whether the truth about the World Word would stay buried. She had to seal Lana’s lips as soon as possible. And no one but Elea the Red Tag could make that happen.

Lana the Moon Tempest was deeply involved in the espionage operation, far beyond any normal spy on the ground. If she talked, it was possible Aureatia’s whole operation could fail. The search would then extend to the two the Moon Tempest had met that day, Elea and Kia, before the next morning could arrive.

If things came to that, even though Kia’s powers were unparalleled, the same couldn’t be said of Elea.

“…What’s wrong, Elea?”

Elea instinctively flinched at the drowsy voice behind her.

“Lana’s…”

“What…? Are you okay? You’re shaking.”

“Lana’s…been snatched by a bandit.”

Kia’s innocent and wholly unsuspecting turquoise eyes reflected like gemstones in the evening light.

“We…need to save her.”

Was it even possible?

With the girl’s almighty Word Arts power, could they kill Lana the Moon Tempest before morning light, without leaving a single trace behind, without Kia herself becoming aware of the situation, and make their escape from the New Principality of Lithia—was it even possible?

CHAPTER 14 Intercepted

It was evening, and the sun hung low in the sky. There was a group advancing from Mage City, where the Aureatia Army was stationed, across the plains on the border of the New Principality territory. It was a patrol unit, composed of regular troops dispatched from Aureatia.

Yuno the Distant Talon and Soujirou the Willow-Sword were accompanying them. They were under there ostensibly to understand the topography near Lithia, Soujirou's strategic target, but another large part of it was the patrol commander's sympathy for Yuno, survivor of Nagan's annihilation, and his desire to hear her story.

"…We heard from Master Hidow that Aureatia and the New Principality are hostile with each other."

Swaying gently while seated behind the knight leading her horse, Yuno questioned the commander riding next to her.

"Aren't we provoking Lithia by approaching their territory armed like this? I know this may be the pointless concern of a simple civilian, but…"

"Yes, well, I believe there's a slight error in your understanding. Although the situation between ourselves is a powder keg, ostensibly, we are on friendly terms. Our treaty included a grace period after Lithia declared independence until they'd fall under our jurisdiction, see. In fact, this very patrol is in compliance with the New Principality's own requests."

"What…? Is that true?"

"They said that Aureatia needs to cooperate with maintaining the regional peace within the area under Mage City jurisdiction, due to a rash of marauder attacks. They claimed that if we wouldn't recognize Lithia's independence, then of course Aureatia needs to fulfill their responsibilities. Essentially, we need to maintain the appearance of marauder suppression and patrol support, like we are now."

"But those marauders…"

The marauders, raiding Lithia and economically attacking the nation, were unconnected with Aureatia only on the surface, but in truth, their presence as an insurgent force was being instigated by Aureatia. Now participating in the assassination plot to some degree, Yuno was able to speculate about the situation behind the scenes with relative accuracy.

Put simply, to Aureatia, this patrol unit was playing a small role in their own elaborate theater.

"Right. You don't need to walk on eggshells. Everyone knows the truth to some extent, and the New Principality should know it, too. Which cements this as harassment, really. They're forcing us to waste resources and energy sortieing in order to slowly chip away at our fighting spirit. Then, if we ever handle things poorly on our end, they can use it as an excuse to open

hostilities. While the impact may be relatively low, there's no downside to picking fights. Taren the Punished is quite the shrewd general, if I do say so, yes."

"…Um, Commander. Is there truly no way to avoid war?"

It might have been an extremely stupid question. Nevertheless, ever since she had heard about the circumstances between the New Principality and Aureatia, it had been on Yuno's mind.

"Like hell I want that."

The reply cut in from the other side of the commander. It was Soujirou, following the group on foot. He was able to trail the patrol with unbelievable agility, even when their horses' pace quickened. All without showing a hint of fatigue.

"I came all this way because you said I'd get to kill some strong fighters. It'll be a problem for me if nothing happens."

"You can't expect the other side to care about what you want, Soujirou."

"Yeah, that's a good point. Guess I'll have to meet with this Taren person directly and kick things off."

"Um…Commander. He's a Visitor and doesn't know much about our world…"

Yuno didn't want war. Death was terrifying.

The era of the True Demon King had sown more than enough death and destruction the world over.

Yuno wondered if these were the values of the world Beyond. Soujirou the Willow-Sword lacked ordinary sense. Even when he sat among the hellish inferno burning Nagan around him, there had been a smile on his face.

"Our side…Aureatia has endeavored quite hard to keep the peace. Taren the Punished was once the Twenty-Third General of Aureatia, after all. Yes, we aren't without our own misgivings. It was proposed to designate Lithia as a special independent region and withdraw the self-proclaimed Demon King recognition, too. Unfortunately…"

"Those bastards still hold their damn wyvern swarm. They're building up arms, too—is that it?"

"……!"

However, there were times when the man would show this level of insight. While his common sense and moral values were unhinged, he continued to grasp things much more clearly than Yuno did.

"Right. The wyverns. Can't have those. A dangerous power, clearly beyond minia control. Taren doesn't intend on stopping the fighting. A *Demon King*, after all. She's trying to replace the kingdoms that have existed from the dawn of mankind and impose a new order. She's intent on fighting, even in this time of upheaval following the resolution of the True Demon King menace…"

"……"

"A Shura possessed by battle."

Yuno kept silent and recalled what Lucelles had asked her in the past—what would the kingdoms do going forward?

The kingdoms' civilization and power, which throughout history had suppressed countless numbers of self-proclaimed Demon Kings and defeated mighty races, including dragons and ogres, to win their territory, were ultimately unable to overcome the True Demon King a single time. The kingdom and its history of more than two thousand years had itself transformed into the unified Aureatia.

Monarchal power was not the absolute strength it had once been. It wasn't outrageous to think there could be those in the world who deemed a new system of order necessary.

"Hey, Yuno."

"…What's wrong?"

"Enemies are here."

A chill ran up Yuno's spine at Soujirou's words.

The commander ordered the soldiers behind him to halt the advance and concentrated his attention on the same area where Soujirou was focused. She didn't know how long they had been there. While still far off in the distance, figures were visible at the base of the hill.

They didn't even form a unit, let alone a whole army. There were only two people standing there.

It's no use.

That was the first thought that ran through her head.

I have to run away. Right now.

Rationally, she clearly recognized the scene before her. There were only two of them. Despite the clear difference in numbers between the two forces, her mind remained fixated on this thought, unable to consider anything else.

The fear stuck in her lungs. Even without any proper combat experience, she reacted to the situation with terror. The sensation felt as if she had returned to the day the Dungeon Golem had arisen.

"Stay on guard."

The commander's hushed order sounded to Yuno as if she were hearing it muffled from a distance.

The outlined silhouettes ahead were of a pure-white skeleton, shrouded in a ragged cloak, and a mandrake, their whole body covered in vines.

"You two. Stop right there. We're with the Aureatia Army, on patrol at the behest of the New Principality of Lithia. Present us with your names and your writ of passage."

"Good at keeping up the charade, aren't we, Captain?"

The skeleton languidly turned his head. Gripped in his right hand was a snow-white long spear, nearly as tall as his body.

"Aren't you going to ask who we are? You're not thinking to tell me you *didn't expect to run into marauders* while out hunting them down, are you?"

“…Nequo. Rita. Yes, take the three in the rear guard and head back. Tell headquarters that—”

Ker-kling—the high-pitched noise was unlike anything Yuno had ever heard before.

It was less like a gust of wind and more like a flash of light. The otherworldly collision of Soujirou’s sword clashing against the skeleton’s spear, coming together faster than the speed of sound itself.

Huh?

The skeleton’s white spear had been moments away from lopping off the commander’s head.

Ultimate speed. The only thing reflected in Yuno’s eyes was the afterimage of the skeleton’s fluttering rags.

In that moment, faster than a blink of an eye. The Aureatia Army and these opponents were separated by a distance of more than sixty paces, and yet…

“…Heh.”

Wedged in between the skeleton and the commander, Soujirou sneered with glee.

Even Soujirou’s *own* eyes couldn’t track the trajectory of the spear attack, following it not with his eyes but with his sixth sense and with the precision to instantly raise his sword to meet it.

“Hey now. You’re pretty good.”

“Well, well, well. Someone who’s able to match my spear, huh?” the skeleton muttered.

There was a deafening clash, wholly unlike the normal sounds of battle. The sounds, overlapping instantaneously with each other during their third clash, could be truly perceived by Shalk and Soujirou.

“Whoops, sorry. Was that last slash of yours the fastest you got?”

“……!”

Soujirou realized he had been sliced open—the laceration in his shoulder not even having enough time to spray blood.

“You looked like you were standing still.”

“You talk a helluva lot for a bag of bones.”

Soujirou’s counterattacks weren’t keeping up. On the other hand, Shalk and his lower body mass used the previous crossing of blades to distance himself, repelling the force of Soujirou’s hefty sword draw. A one-sided amount of space, enough for the blade of the long spear to reach its opponent.

He was exchanging blows at blinding speed with an otherworldly Visitor. Shalk the Sound Slicer’s spear was impossible to see.

Upper brachium. Collarbone.

Soujirou saw it. By the time there were signs of Shalk’s movements or initial motion in his main spear hand, it was ultimately too late to react.

Instinct and experience. He used battle logic, with nigh-precognitive accuracy, to see through his opponent’s next move.

Groin. Left femoral artery. Heart. Right ear.

The air burst open in an instant. His offhand left his sword hilt. Soujirou's sword deflected the white spear, aimed at his upper right arm. The spear cut an imperceptible arc and moved to his collarbone. He diverted it with the tip of his hilt. The spearhead reversed in midair and cracked like lightning toward his groin. He predicted the attack. The spear continued a shallow cut toward his left thigh. Barehanded—his sword gone—he used the back of his offhand to hit the spear on the side and deflect the swipe. His opponent opened up space. Each and every move was faster than a bursting spark of flame.

"Hiii-yah!"

Soujirou charged forward with a rasping gasp of breath. At the same time, Shalk's stab toward his heart, due to the shorter-than-expected range of the attack, missed its lethal mark. The skeleton twisted his body. Soujirou slashed in a deep, diagonal arc down.

No response.

The space between his ribs, huh?

He had *passed through* the bones. The underside of the skeleton held none of the internal organs normally expected.

"You got some grit—I'll give you that. *Heh-heh*," Shalk joked as he poised himself again for his extremely agile chain of attacks, capable of slaying the average person many times over.

"You're grinding me to the bone here."

"Awful. I'll *break* them for that."

Behind the heroic scene of battle, the commander gritted his teeth and shouted back—

"Keep those hands moving! Target your shots! Not at the skeleton…aim for the mandrake!"

Meanwhile, Soujirou planted his feet and forcefully slashed his sword, causing Shalk to once again recoil and fall back.

"Gaaah…!"

"…Higuare, I'll stop this swordsman. Seize their horses."

Where speed was concerned, Shalk was overwhelmingly the faster of the two. Nevertheless, Soujirou the Willow-Sword's battle sense undermined that contrast. Even with his extreme agility, Shalk couldn't continue to fight at an advantageous distance.

Both possessing martial prowess that usually robbed their opponents of time to defend themselves, the two fighters were locked in what appeared to be a physically impossible conflict.

"Crossing swords with this guy is gonna be a time sink. You go on first, Higuare."

"Okay."

Shalk's mandrake companion slowly walked forward. While the abnormal speed of the skeleton and Visitor's battle held their rapt attention, the reaction of the Aureatia soldiers was not at all slow. They were part of a well-tempered Aureatia regular army force. At that point, they had fully prepared themselves to meet the unsettling mandrake's advance.

Their fingers felt the arrows in their quivers. They gripped their spear shafts. Others still tried to reverse their horses to act as messengers.

"I will be seizing your horses. You're still within range."

His vines burst forward all at once with a loud whipcrack.

"Fire!" one of the Aureatia soldiers yelled.

The countless vines formed into a single roiling billow and engulfed the soldiers.

The murderous wave, coupled with the mandrake's transcendental skill, was far quicker than the speed of the horses' gallop or the arrows' flight. All while Higuare the Pelagic remained at a distance of close to forty paces away.

The soldiers tried to parry or cut down the deluge of vegetative whips. However, the vines seemed to have complex nerves running through them, and they circumvented all the soldiers' defenses, weaving themselves between the gaps in their armor and rending their flesh.

"Hrk!"

"Gaaah!"

"Gack!"

"Hrrrgh…"

The soldiers groaned, but these were not their last gasps before death. The simultaneous slashes from Higuare the Pelagic's forty-two vines cut no deeper than necessary, burying in between the gaps in armor and leaving only miniscule scratches behind.

Soujirou, still continuing his back-and-forth against Shalk, and Yuno, who had the rider she shared her horse with act as her shield, were the only two miraculously unharmed by the attack. Looking at the knight in front of her, Yuno saw he was moaning in intense pain.

"I-it's so…hot, *hngggh*…"

"A-aaah."

Yuno was terrified.

The sight of the rider, suffering before her eyes, was ghastly. Was a scrape on the chin really enough of a wound to send a sturdy grown man, a soldier of Aureatia's unrivaled army, into moans of agony? Yuno quickly looked back at the commander.

"C-Commander…! Are y-you okay, Commander…?!"

"Th-the wound's…not fatal, yes. He aimed at the gaps in my armor, but—*koff, koff!*"

"Commander?"

The commander coughed, and fluid leaked out not from his mouth but from his eye sockets. An unsettling milk-white liquid.

Mandrake poison. His nerves were dissolving. A scream got stuck in the back of Yuno's throat.

"　___　!"

Then, the armor of the rider seated in front of her slipped from its mount.

She could tell that the body inside had lost its shape, oozing across the ground. He, too, was melting.

From what Yuno could see, all the troops had similarly dissolved. Not a single one had managed to escape. The previous wave of vines had been a true tsunami of death, swallowing everything in its path. What little of the event could be called a proper "battle" ended with the mandrake's attack.

“Yuno!” Soujirou shouted as he continued fiercely trading blows with Shalk.

Although he had been able to cut and fell the poisoned blades Higuare sent at him, he was still incapable of moving an inch, as though nailed to the ground at his feet by his opponent’s attacks. The otherworldly blade himself, who knew no fear and had slain the Dungeon Golem in Nagan… Even he was backed into a corner.

“Hurry up and get outta here! They’ll kill you!”

“B-but I—”

“He’s right. You will leave.”

The voice sounded like rustling leaves.

“Eep!”

Yuno heard the reply right beside her. Higuare the Pelagic held on to the body of Yuno’s horse, his roots coiling around it.

“H-help…!”

“Yes, I will help you, but I need to withdraw from this area.”

Yuno was terrified. The unidentified skeleton, boasting speed faster than even Soujirou, was a threat that defied her darkest imagination, but this mandrake’s fighting prowess was even more absurd.

Could anyone ever hope to beat a monster capable of going up against an entire patrol from the world’s largest nation and poisoning them all to death in a single attack, faster than any of them could react?

“Please ride this horse to Lithia. I am unable to direct horses, so I’ll need your assistance.”

“*Hngggh…* B-but I’m…”

She saw one of the mandrake’s poisoned blades glint in the corner of her eye.

“Please.”

“……”

She wasn’t the sole survivor by coincidence. Higuare was simply obediently carrying out his order to return to Lithia. From the beginning, he’d made sure to leave behind someone capable of riding a horse, killing the rest. The one quickest to buckle under fear and who held no strong sense of loyalty to the cause…Yuno the Distant Talon.

Yuno shed tears at her own miserable state. She was weak. Those who didn’t possess Soujirou’s level of supernatural power had no choice but to be crushed under the irrationality of the world.

Coerced, she drew back the reins and sent the horse running—leaving behind Soujirou, still locked in battle.

Yuno bit her lip in sorrow over the scene that had just played out before her.

“Why…? Why…am I always begging for my life…?!”

CHAPTER 15 Thunderclap

The showers that had begun in late evening had intensified. A group appearing before the Mage City fortress housing the Aureatia Army had wrapped themselves firmly in overcoats to ward off the cold and rain.

“What do you want, old man? If you’re here to cause trouble, I’ll chase you right back to Aureatia.”

Inside his office, Hidow was clearly annoyed by the sudden appearance of his guest.

“An official dispatch for reinforcements. I’m also putting in a request to the assembly for a temporary sortie. I’ve followed all the protocols!”

“I told you, it’s unnecessary. Don’t you get it?”

“B-but… *Gnnngh…*”

The guest was another of Aureatia’s Twenty-Nine Officials, like Hidow—the Sixth General, an elderly military officer named Harghent the Still. This man, preoccupied with his own unworthy and incongruous position, was openly despised by Hidow.

He had returned a few days prior, his expedition to slay Vikeon the Smoldering ending in failure and with half his force of riflemen, trained from birth, slain. Further still, notice of his troops’ march had been delayed, making his encampment interfere with Hidow’s transportation operation, leading to unneeded conflict along the route.

The amount of troops Hidow had in tow was discernibly unreliable, and Hidow didn’t believe they’d add much fighting strength at all.

“You being here will just confuse the troops. I’m absolutely not leaving on-site command to you. If you still won’t back down, then leave your soldiers with me and return to Aureatia yourself.”

There existed no officially sanctioned hierarchies based on age or rank among Aureatia’s Twenty-Nine Officials, which made it possible for the Twentieth Minister Hidow to freely give his opinions to the Sixth General, old enough to be his father.

From the perspective of the soldiers on the ground, however, it was possible to have multiple chains of commands at once. No matter how inept of a general Harghent was, he understood enough to know that.

“That’s not true! You need someone specialized in fighting wyverns! You realize this isn’t an ordinary wyvern, don’t you?!”

“…Hold on. Are you playing me for a fool? You think I would try to go up against Taren’s wyvern army without a plan? That’s so pathetic, I could cry. Get out of my sight.”

“Taren?! No, she’s not the problem!”

Harghent slammed on the desk with his fist.

He didn’t care how it seemed to Hidow. For him, there was a much more urgent problem at hand.

“The Star Runner is coming!”

The Sixth General’s soldiers were few, but all of them were perfectly equipped to fight wyverns. Not to fight the wyvern soldiers from the New Principality of Lithia—their resources were for an even mightier threat.

“…Alus the Star Runner? Coming *here*?”

“The New Principality stole the Cold Star from the Great Nagan Labyrinth! Faster than the Star Runner himself! Do you expect him to overlook that?! Do you think he won’t look for it everywhere?! He might attack Mage City as well as the New Principality!”

“What if he does? What are you going to do?! If you’re going to take down the Star Runner with those weapons of yours, go right ahead! Please just be quiet and—”

Suddenly, a tremendous impact shook the entire fortress.

“…!”

“Whoaaa.”

Harghent awkwardly tumbled to the ground. The colossal war desk slid to the floor at the forceful impact.

A heavy sound began to reverberate, the flaking of something peeling off the outer walls.

“Wh-what…? What was that?!”

The elderly general crawled along the floor, hand gripping the edge of the war desk, and looked at the light leaking in through the outside windows.

It was a cloudy night.

“Wh-what’s that…light…?”

The strange sound continued, heavy, like air hissing out from somewhere. It came from the stone walls surrounding the Mage City fortress, boiling, bubbling like lava from the mouth of an active volcano, and bursting intermittently.

A *beam of dazzling light*, as if straight from the sun, continued to radiate.

The beam showed no signs of waning, maintaining a constant intensity as it pierced through the next layer of the wall.

The following shock waves destroyed the two men’s equilibrium. The fortress itself was directly hit.

“Dammit!” Hidow exclaimed, holding on to the desk to regain his composure. There was only one possible explanation behind the abnormal situation.

“The Cold Star.”

The Great Nagan Labyrinth’s decisive magic item, capable of direct salvos between cities. Hidow had known from the beginning that the distance between the New Principality of Lithia and Mage City put them within range. Be that as it may—

“They’re launching it at us now?! Has Taren lost her damn mind?!”

There hadn’t been any declaration of war. Despite the cold-war situation with Aureatia, currently, on paper, Mage City was on friendly terms with the New Principality. There was no moral righteousness on the New Principality’s side.

Hidow had a hard time believing the Taren the Punished he knew lacked the power to provide some justification for starting an outright conflict. If she was to choose the path of war to secure her authority and there was no morality or justice on her side, then she would be unable to preserve a rightful leadership.

In other words…this means it’s just as I expected. This is her answer.

What if the most powerful and wisest self-proclaimed Demon King was able to cast even *her righteousness* aside? What if the leaders of Aureatia had misread just how low Taren the Punished would stoop?

“Lord Hidow! We’ve received a report!”

“*Ngggh…* What?! You talking about that salvo just now?!”

Hidow could tell the messenger had urgent information, rushing into the room without a single knock.

“No, sir… The patrol unit hasn’t returned! According to the scouts sent to check up on them…everyone was killed by some kind of poison…and that th-there were no survivors…”

“Dammit! Why didn’t you inform me earlier?! A little sooner, before the attack, and we could’ve…”

That wasn’t true. Hidow knew it, too. The enemy had exterminated them all to ensure no one got the message out or alerted Mage City that something unusual was happening. Not only that, but the dead patrol weren’t easily replaceable Mage City soldiers, either. They had been Aureatia regular troops. It took time to confirm the safety of personnel with whom they’d lost contact. It took time to redeploy troops to account for a large number of field casualties.

Then, after buying all that time, they had initiated a surprise attack. All the strategic movements had been thoroughly woven together.

“…Entirely wiped out. Everyone…?! Even Soujirou the Willow-Sword?!”

“Y-yes, sir… No one has returned. We couldn’t identify any survivors…”

“Hidow! Hidow the Clamp! Do you have a plan?!”

Harghent was in utter disarray, anxiously looking toward the window. He seemed terrified of the next attack. Hidow cradled his head in his hands in insurmountable frustration.

“Soujirou wasn’t the only piece in the assassination plot. There’s still another… Kuze the Passing Disaster should be in play by now. Now that the New Principality has made their attack, he should be on the move. That’s what we arranged.”

“Fool! The time for assassination ploys is long gone! We need to send troops!”

“Like hell I’m sending anyone outside the fortress! The wyvern soldiers have to be on their way to claim the city!”

“……!”

Harghent wasn’t looking out the window from fear of the next beam of light. The abhorrent ultimate magic item, the Cold Star, only bombarded the city to herald the true threat to come.

The New Principality’s wyvern army would flock there for their main assault, charging through the opening provided by the destruction of the city’s defenses and the chaos in the chain of command. No matter how much the Aureatia Army may have prided themselves on their skill, as part of minia-kind’s greatest nation, when attacked in the dark of night by a large host in the sky, it was clear to see they would easily collapse.

“I-in that case…I’ll take responsibility for sending the troops out. There shouldn’t be any issues that way…”

Sixth General Harghent whimpered, still prostrate on the desk.

“Suppressing wyverns is my job.”

“Enough of your nonsense, old man!”

Hidow could no longer hide his annoyance, slamming the wall with his fist. It was impossible for him to understand the logical route that had led Harghent to his proposal. They weren’t dealing with ordinary wyverns. Harghent himself had just said as much.

“You think you’re ready to launch antiair defenses out of the crater they left behind?! The moment you go outside, they’ll hunt you like cattle! If you open the gates to let a battalion in, that flock will slip right through and slaughter everyone! Shut all the windows and hold out! All we can do is defend the fortress!”

“Still, Hidow, with that, winning will be—”

“Not impossible! This may be sooner than expected, but I knew long ago this fortress would be attacked! In a position outside the city, I have a detached force on standby! We can use them to draw the attention of those flying lizards!”

“…B-but still. Even then!”

Harghent balled his hands tight and looked out the window again. As long as they were being targeted from the skies, as long as they didn’t know when the next attack from the Cold Star could come, standing at the window was sheer lunacy and needlessly exposed him to danger.

“What will happen to the Mage City soldiers down below?! While they die defending the lives of their citizens…y-you want the Twenty-Nine Officials of Aureatia and the monarch authority to curl inward like a turtle and watch everyone perish?!”

The warning bell continued to peal from a tower, lurched by the impact and ready to crumble. The Mage City guards seemed to have moved into action. Their bows and armor were clearly inferior in quality. Naturally, their proficiency and dexterity were far below the level of Aureatia regular soldiers, too.

“I’ll go. I…I have never backed down from a wyvern threat. If I don’t go out to fight them now, then everything’s lost! I won’t let those bastards devour anyone!”

“Hey!”

Incensed, Hidow grabbed the elderly general by the collar.

“If that splendid attitude was enough to get it done, then great! But do you know what everyone says about you, old man?! Listen, you fool! You’re not sending out a single damn soldier! That goes for your own troops, too! You could be some distinguished Aureatia soldier, and it’d be the same story! I’m not going to join you as you die a dog’s death, drunk on your own opinion of yourself!”

“…F-fine… Fine, then! In that case, I don’t need any soldiers!”

Even while the menace of the young man, more than a decade his junior, sent a cold sweat pouring down his brow, Harghent proclaimed his resolve. Evil was betraying yourself.

“I’ll go out by myself!”

Even as a member of the twenty-nine individuals sitting at the summit of Aureatia’s authority, the man was nevertheless still the type to make such foolish decisions.

“…Dammit!”

Hidow cursed, now left alone.

In certain aspects, Harghent’s judgment was correct. In the face of the New Principality’s unprovoked and preemptive attack, should Aureatia appear to back down from the fight, it could transform into a point of criticism from the citizenry.

…That’s only if we can win, though.

After watching the shrinking figure of the Sixth General flying out of the strategic stronghold alone and without any of his crack, personally trained soldiers, Hidow wondered—what were the enemy’s intentions? What were they looking to achieve from this attack?

They targeted this small city, even launching a preemptive strike without any declaration of war and forfeiting their position of moral superiority. But why haven’t we seen any ground troops deployed to occupy the city or any movements against the city itself? The object of the attack wasn’t occupation…it’s nothing but a one-sided massacre. Damn that Taren… Is she planning on turning the whole place into a nest for her wyvern pets…?

His thoughts remained nothing more than vague conjecture. For the moment, he wasn’t able to get a read on Taren’s strategy.

Being unable to understand them was terrifying. The violence and destruction were horrible. Almost like—almost like the Demon King Army.

Taren is trying to turn herself into a new locus of terror. So she’s planning on making Mage City an example. Not a self-proclaimed Demon King but the next Demon King herself… Is that her angle here?

Remaining inside the fortress, Hidow issued instructions to a staff officer during a strategy meeting.

“…Protect the city’s troops and that old coot Harghent while you’re at it. Connect me to the seventh emergency channel on the radzio.”

“The seventh emergency channel…?! Just who are you contacting, sir?!”

“Don’t worry about it and get to work.”

Hidow spoke into the radzio provided by the staff officer.

“Are you awake?”

<Tee-hee.>

A young girl’s giggle echoed from the radzio. A sweet voice, incongruous with the current wartime tragedy.

She was Nihilo the Vortical Stampede. The revenant girl, escorted by Kuze the Passing Disaster, was currently with a detached force of the Aureatia Army, deployed in case of emergency.

“Time to sortie, Vortical Stampede. Get out ahead of the enemy blocking the Sixth General’s troops and annihilate them. Shoot and bring down every last one of the New Principality’s wyverns. Until you’re given orders, do your utmost to avoid harming any minia soldiers.”

<Tee-hee. Are you sure? You were all so reluctant to rely on me, weren’t you?>

“The situation’s changed. Soujirou the Willow-Sword’s been killed, and we can no longer guarantee the assassination’s success. We’re sending our troops into action, too. If by any chance Kuze’s mission ends in failure…”

Taren wasn’t the only side equipped with a weapon like the Cold Star, capable of vast swaths of destruction. The Vortical Stampede was Hidow’s true trump card, hidden away in preparation for such an attack.

“…then you’re to eradicate the New Principality.”

As long as he held no fear of citizen sacrifices and the lost moral position such sacrifices would entail, total annihilation was an option. The Twentieth Minister Hidow from the very start had faced this upcoming battle with all paths to victory prepared.

<Sure. That’s easy enough for me. If you win this war, you’ll grant my wish, won’t you?>

“Guaranteed rights, same as a minia, and official Aureatia citizenship. I’ll get them approved without any fuss. Live however you’d like.”

<My school enrollment, too.>

“If the operation’s a success.”

The tactical instructions set to alter the course of the conflict finished with terrible brevity. Hidow the Clamp appeared calm and composed. The staff officer looked terrified, speaking up to try to gauge Hidow’s state of mind.

“A-are you sure it’s a good idea…for us to use a monster like her?”

“…She’s a weapon, after all. It’s just like our little transaction there suggested, though.”

Hidow’s reasoning for releasing Nihilo was entirely because he judged there was room for negotiations with the Vortical Stampede, a dreaded and hideous weapon of war. No one else had even considered such an option.

“She wants to go back to being a minia.”

“Inconceivable.”

Previously, she had been the monster who had eradicated an entire battlefront of the Aureatia Army all by herself. Most of the soldiers weren’t even aware that Aureatia had captured her alive. She wildly outstripped the other races of constructs, let alone compared to minia races.

“Do you believe her, Lord Hidow?”

“You’ll see real quick whether I made the right decision or not. No matter how it ends.”

◆

A field encampment, inside a basin a short distance away from Mage City. Making use of the political status and artfully set up out of the range of the wyvern soldiers’ patrols, this staging ground had also been prepared to *import* Nihilo the Vortical Stampede.

The young revenant girl, one eye covered under her bangs, ran her hand along the heavy carriage. The contents, due to the misgivings of several transport forces, had been carried all the way here using a specialized pully system and gigant military engineers.

“Vortical Stampede! You’ve received orders for dispatch from Lord Hidow?”

“Yeah. He just told me. Can you open the lock?”

The young soldier assigned to guard the heavy carriage winced while undoing the lock.

“…Are we really bringing this thing out…?”

“*Tee-hee-hee.* You think I’m going to betray everyone, too?”

“……”

“I’m not a minia, so you don’t trust me?”

Aureatia was a nation for the minia races. Entirely unlike the New Principality, which utilized wyverns as well as beastfolk and constructs, irrespective of race. Examining it from another perspective, this minia kingdom had such powerful unity among its people, it was able to dominate the world, and thus, throughout history, the non-minia races were shouldered with a destiny of defeat and subjugation.

The heavy carriage opened with a loud, grating creak. The giant silhouette contained within was not minia in nature.

The parts folded and fit snugly inside contained eight massive arthropod legs. The monster, encased in metallic jet-black armor, had the appearance of a spider but enlarged to abnormal size.

A mighty arachnid abomination, capable of comprehending Word Arts, known as the tarantula.

Normally, it was a beastfolk that solely inhabited the most remote hinterlands, away from minia settlements, and was one of the most terrifying creatures in the region, second only to dragons. The warp threads

of a tarantula's webs boasted such durability, an ogre's Herculean strength wasn't enough to pull them apart, while the weft threads possessed a sharp edge that could easily slice through a wyvern, bones and all.

Nevertheless, the armor shielding the abomination was clearly the product of minia hands. This creature was, just like Nihilo the Vortical Stampede, a construct that had been remodeled at the hands of another, as an extension of the girl's body.

Within the gaping hole in the tarantula's chest, there was set an open space just big enough for a single minia to fit inside.

"…We get to fight again."

It had been given the name Helneten the Burial. Nihilo had a loving attachment to it, despite it being a revenant incapable of comprehending Word Arts, robbed of its original tarantula will. It was as if it were a part of her own body.

"But that's just who we are—isn't that right, Helneten?"

Nihilo undid her shirt buttons one by one, removing her belt and exposing her white bare skin to the nighttime air.

"…W-wait a sec!"

"*Hee-hee.* What's wrong?"

The young construct girl simply gave the unnerved soldier an alluring smile.

She began slipping her naked limbs inside Helneten. The nerve feelers extending from Nihilo's spine were, from the very beginning, connector organs expressly for controlling the organic battle tank. Though separate in body and name, with their shared nerves and five senses, the two had no boundaries between them, the thin fabric barrier of clothes a mere hindrance to their connection.

Controlled from within, the metallic body closed. The organic battle tank Helneten could be opened and closed only through direct neural connection with its would-be pilot, Nihilo.

Wrapped up within the jet-black armored carrion, the young girl's whisper escaped like a sigh of relief.

"*Aaah*, it's been so long since I've had *my body*."

The eight eyes of the tarantula sparkled to life, and the sinister red light sent an ominous glow through the forest encampment.

The box housing Helneten the Burial was demolished with the tank's first movements. The heavy steel carriage, too, was little more than soft butter when faced with a display of the dreadful tank's true strength.

The gigantic figure then scuttled off and disappeared, leaving a straight line cut into the earth beneath it.

"*Tee-hee-hee!* My body…feels so light!"

With no one around to give her orders, Nihilo giggled with a delight none could hear as she piloted the racing jet-black machine, mowing down trees in its wake.

"Free, we're free… Ahhh, what a wonderful feeling!"

CHAPTER 16 Outbreak

Moments prior to the initial Cold Star salvo. Having arrived at the New Principality under duress by Higuare the Pelagic, Yuno was being kept in one of the city's spires, within a ground-level prison. The pale light filtering in from the gaps in the lattice served only to remind her that none of the people going about their lives outside was aware what was locked up inside.

"This place isn't really for keeping prisoners. They're just holding cells for violent drunks and such. So feel free to try escaping if you'd like."

The man who had taken her to the prison was a minia, with black hair and piercing eyes. On the way, she had been asked a number of formal questions, but it seemed her civilian status, divorced from any military secrets, and Aureatia's progressing assassination plot had both been found out a long time prior.

She was nothing more than the rider who had delivered Higuare back to the New Principality.

"Sorry for bringing you here so soon after you arrived, but see, I just caught myself an even more important guest. I can't really spend too much time on you. Ah well, just take it easy, okay?"

"……You, that sword you have…"

Yuno had heard about the man's appearance from Hidow the Clamp. Her mortal foe, the one she needed to find at all costs.

"Swordsman…! You're Dakai the Magpie, aren't you…?!"

"Well, well, well, looks like I've finally got some fangirls of my own, eh? I keep telling people I'm not a swordsman, but no one ever believes me…"

Dakai smiled. A beaming smile, unexpected from a man who had witnessed an entire city collapse into ruin.

"But it seems like my face is starting to get recognized a bit. Guess I won't be able to steal in Aureatia much anymore."

"I…I'm Yuno the Distant Talon! Yuno of Nagan Labyrinth City! The city you…"

"Oh. Nagan, huh…?"

A meaningless disaster. The nightmare that destroyed her entire world. She wanted to believe someone had caused it all, to believe there was at least one responsible. A sole culprit behind the entire tragedy, like the True Demon King of times past.

"It's all because you *solved* the Nagan Labyrinth! That's why everything happened! All of us, because of you—"

"Hold on now—there's something off about those remarks of yours."

The Visitor cut off the girl's hateful shouts with a coldly serious look.

"Sure, the incident back in Nagan might've started because I cleared the Great Labyrinth and stole the Cold Star. But all you Nagan scholars and

adventurers were trying to unravel the labyrinth's secrets to begin with. Am I wrong?"

"What…?"

"Yet none of you could've predicted that the Dungeon Golem would've started up when someone reached the labyrinth's deepest section, right?"

Not a single person had known anything about it—about how deep the Great Labyrinth, left behind by the self-proclaimed Demon King Kiyazuna, stretched downward, nor how much malice was packed within the calamitous puzzle box.

"…Th-then what am I supposed to do?! Are you saying…you people could shrug it off if your town was destroyed and you lost your friends?! Your family?! Is that why you're so set on going to war?!"

"You've got it all wrong. I don't want to go to war one bit."

"W-well then… Don't you think there are others who feel the same way?! I never wanted any of it…"

"Doesn't matter to me. Like war or hate it, everyone's free to decide for themselves."

"That's not…that's not the issue!"

Yuno at last felt like she understood the truth behind the shapeless rancor that boiled inside her.

What she truly despised was the apathy of the powerful.

—Everyone was the same. Dakai, Soujirou, Hidow. The ignorant citizens of the New Principality. The arrogance that you'll always be on the side of the plunderer, never the plundered, and the apathy that prioritizes one's objective over the woeful state of those trampled in the process—these were what incited the horrors of war.

They were different from Yuno. Different from Lucelles. They could determine their own fate for themselves; they were strong.

"But, well, I guess that part about being unconcerned if my friends or family died was true. I never got to have luxuries like that, see."

"……!"

"Ha-ha. You can steal all the treasure you want, but you can't steal family."

"I…I promise I will take my revenge on you! I'll never forgive you… I don't care if it's selfish or wrong—I'll force you to know the agony you put me through!"

"Sure, I guess, but…are you planning on going in order? Getting vengeance on me for solving it, anyone else who was there, the people who made it, and those involved with the whole thing? I get that you don't want to hear this from a guy you hate so much, but it sounds like you'll never be free."

"Who gives a damn about any of that?!"

"Phew, boy… Okay, Yuno. If you feel that strongly about it…"

Dakai crouched down and patted Yuno on the head. He fixed her with a cheerful smile.

“Kill me now.”

“……”

“You have arrowheads up your sleeve you’re gonna shoot me with, yes? Go ahead and give it a shot. See if you’re faster than my fingers.”

Without so much as touching her, he knew Yuno’s weapons and her planned method of attack. Her weapons hadn’t been taken from her when she was captured because, for him, it wasn’t even necessary.

He had already decided her escaping wouldn’t cause problems. The patrol had been ambushed. If the flames of war were already lit, there was nothing a single, powerless girl could do on her own in enemy territory.

“Nnngggghhh…gaaaaaah…”

“There, there. That’s all there is to vengeance, really. Feels silly to spend your life on *that level* of feelings, right? You just have to find yourself a new homeland, with a new family, right?”

Yuno’s legs went limp, and she slumped to the floor. Following her mortal foe, his back turned in the other direction, was too much for her.

“Nggggghhh…!”

“Don’t worry. Once things settle down outside, I’ll let you go. Out of respect for that spunk of yours.”

She was isolated. In this world that accepted all deviants brought over from the Beyond, there was still a limitless number of truths and threats, more than anyone could hope to fully uncover. More than a young girl like Yuno could ever hope to reach, like she was nothing more than a worm in the ground. Yuno couldn’t inflict a single wound, mental or physical, on anybody.

“Lucelles… I—I can’t…”

Yuno had long accepted her punishment for her misguided hatred.

This powerlessness made her despair far more than being banished to darkness inside enemy territory.

◆

The bleached-white mercenary, wrapped in his tattered cloak, returned to the office inside Lithia’s central stronghold—Shalk the Sound Slicer.

Through the window, he gazed down with his black eye sockets at the packed soldiers.

“Lotsa guys down there. A festival starting up?”

“*Hmph.* I suppose that’s what it feels like to someone like you.”

The unparalleled elite soldiers of the New Principality of Lithia were gathered in the office together with Taren—Dakai the Magpie. Regnejee the Wings of Sunset. Higuare the Pelagic.

“You were slow to return, Master Shalk.”

“I guess so. Just glad to see you got back safely, Higuare.”

The undead skeletons were normally a race that did not feel fatigue, but Shalk's current state suggested the exact opposite. His fatigue stemmed from his long period of extreme mental focus wearing on his nerves.

"That swordsman really had it in him. Dakai, I think he might be a Visitor like you."

"Really? Were you able to kill him?"

"I pegged him down and bought a lot of time. More work than this level of a reward warranted. If I was going to actually kill him…I'd be *risking my life*, too."

"That's plenty, Shalk the Sound Slicer. I'll work out a plan to stop his arrival. Just take a rest for now."

"Appreciate it. I don't mean to boast, but I'm quite skilled at taking it easy."

Shalk languidly slumped into a chair. When he sat motionless, he truly resembled an actual sun-bleached skeleton.

Taren traced the outline of her favorite sword's scabbard.

"…Outstanding individual strength, then? They plan on assassinating me."

"It seems likely. Now that I've scurried home, you're in a better position to run away, too, right?"

"*Ha-ha.* Don't be absurd. If I'm to become a ruler of fear, then I need to put that terror on display," Taren declared to all those gathered, unsheathing her sword.

"…If only I could have ruled the world with honesty and benevolence."

At that point, her words were little more than self-deprecation.

With the bombardment from the Cold Star, the sparks of war were lit. The Demon King couldn't turn back now.

"However, to us, living now, we have no such pity to spare. There are none in this world who have unyielding faith in logic and justice. The True Demon King stole all that away from us. No matter what smooth twittering one may employ, fear is the only power that will engrave itself in the hearts of the people."

The world yearned for the strength to defeat the True Demon King. While the fallen monarch was no more, the strength left behind that empty throne still squirmed beneath the surface. Just like the Nagan Dungeon Golem had been left behind. And like now, where those once lauded as champions would inevitably end up the same way in an age of peace.

Hundreds of demons and fiends, the Shura, able to be subjugated by normal means no longer.

Looking at the state of the sole remaining royalty in Aureatia, these Shura would surely make their move, again guiding the world toward ruin. Taren sought the power to make sure these Shura didn't rise up again. She wanted fear.

"I will open up hostilities. With the light of the Cold Star, I will carve out my will and trample all those who stand before me. As long as the world

hinders this will of might, I will fight. You lot should do the same. You all wanted this, didn't you? This world of Shura, able to wield those weapons and talents of yours as you please."

"Assassins, eh…? Could be trouble. Heh, they seem strong."

The minia bandit. Dakai the Magpie.

"I am simply protecting my new master."

The mandrake gladiator. Higuare the Pelagic.

"I'm ready whenever. The fools have but one fate ahead of them."

The wyvern commander. Regnejee the Wings of Sunset.

"Regnejee. Remove the barriers and topple Mage City. Destroy their supply lines and isolate them. We first need them to see the terror of your wyverns."

"*Grak, grak, grak.* Then you've agreed, Taren. All the minia races of Mage City are now prey for my swarm."

The wyvern let out a shrill, laughter-like cawing.

"But…before that, there's another fool we need to take care of."

An unending string of reports rang out from the radzio transmitter hanging from Regnejee's neck. Raising his head, he stretched out his wings. His defensive network had already sensed something appearing on the far side of the clouds.

"Are they Aureatia reinforcements, Regnejee?"

"We expected this," the wyvern unwaveringly declared. Having cast his own freedom aside, he had long looked forward to settling the score with this opponent.

"I'll take care of him before anything else."

High in the sky.

The wyvern descended through a break in the evening clouds, looking down over the lights of the city. The new arrival, associated with neither Aureatia nor Lithia, sharply opened up his wings and took in the wind.

There were three arms on the wyvern's body.

CHAPTER 17 Nightfire

Dusky streets, torched by the Cold Star, were under siege by innumerable sets of wings. The wings did not belong to any birds. They were fixed to creatures with the intelligence to comprehend Word Arts and easily able to rend soldiers, horse and all, with their claws—a flock of wyverns.

“Keep your horses moving! Draw them as far from the city as you—”

“Look out!”

“…What—? Nnngggaaack!”

The soldier sending his horse into a gallop collapsed with a dull sound, and the one looking back at his comrade’s cry had his skull ruptured. They were part of a suicide corps, acting as bait to draw the flock away from the city.

The New Principality wyverns were merely circling up in the sky.

“Dammit… There it is again! Another of those attacks…!”

“The wyverns haven’t even dropped down from the sky! Dammit…!”

If the soldiers peeked out from their cover, that same second, their bones would break, and they would perish on the spot with their skulls split in two. While the soldiers thought it might be a sniper, they were having too much difficulty ascertaining the true origin of the attacks in the pitch-black night.

“Wait… The flames are spreading. Over near the granary. That blaze didn’t come from that light attack.”

“…The wyverns?! They’re launching fire at us?!”

Although plainly lacking the skill of Aureatia’s soldiers, the Mage City troops had dealt with numerous wyvern attacks in the course of protecting their city. However, the New Principality wyverns were unlike anything they had ever seen before. They possessed both high intelligence and strong leadership. The soldiers could believe the outrageous possibility the wyverns were launching fire at them.

Even if that was the case, though, they had no recourse. In this world, those not on the side of the powerful had no say in the choices before them.

“That’s exactly right. The bastards are throwing fire!”

The man rushed over, without even a horse, from the collapsed doorway.

This soldier was much older than any of them, but judging from his first-class equipment, the others recognized him as a general of the Aureatia Army.

“Defenders of Mage City! I am Harghent, Sixth General of Aureatia! Harghent the Still!”

“The Wing Clipper?!”

“The Sixth General is here?!”

Harghent took out a bloodstained piece of rubble and showed it to the Mage City soldiers.

“This is the truth of their attacks. Throwing stones…or maybe dropping stones, to be more precise. There are wyverns that live in areas near the sea that do this sort of thing. They take shells and shelled creatures, drop them from high up in the air, and cause destruction that way. These aren’t sniper attacks; they’re throwing stones!”

“…R-rocks…?!”

“Everyone was killed…by some damn rocks?”

In an age with the popularization of muskets, throwing rocks was still tactically effective in actual warfare. The Mage City soldiers, too, were well aware of this but hadn’t considered the possibility.

Their misconception wasn’t solely due to the darkness limiting their vision—they were all operating under the assumption that the only beings capable of using weapons to fight on the battlefield were limited to the minia and monstrous races.

“Listen. This means the enemy has the smarts to utilize these things for air-raid tactics! Numerous wyverns are *bombing* small ground targets with a large number of rocks… They aren’t one-shot attacks; they’re attacking in waves, with another similar battalion waiting in reserve! They’re throwing fire at the city so that they can see us down here when we can’t see them!”

It was the first time the experienced and long-active wyvern hunter Harghent had seen wyverns attack with such a tactical approach. Normally, wyvern methods involved their sharp and powerful claws, as well as dive-bombs from above to utilize their mobility.

“In that case, that means the spreading flames—”

“A planned attack. They’re dropping pots of fuel, feeding the blaze, to try to smoke us out from our hiding spots. Expose yourself carelessly in fear of the fire, and you’ll be brought down on the spot!”

Even seeing through the enemy’s tricks, Harghent had managed to reach the soldiers only thanks to some blessed good luck. Just as Hidow had warned him in the fortress, a force large enough to be seen from the skies mobilized would be wiped out on the spot, unable to defend itself.

“General Harghent! Is that the New Principality’s wyvern army up there?! Why?! What reason is there to attack us like this?!”

“I don’t know! Nevertheless, that salvo just now was a one-sided strike, without any declaration of war! The New Principality of Lithia has broken the treaty! We can avoid conflict no longer!”

“Has the Aureatia Army abandoned us?! How much longer must we hold out?!”

“Ummm…A-Aureatia had a patrol unit eradicated by a Lithia ambush! Therefore, it will take time to re-form, and…r-reinforcements are being called for! We need to start with what we can do! I’ll think up our strategy!” Harghent proclaimed with an agonized look on his face. Aureatia wouldn’t save them. Nevertheless, faced with an opposing commander with such

high tactical abilities and advanced troop operations, Harghent wasn't sure what his presence could add to the situation.

"Consider the source and take countermeasures! Countermeasures! For now, focus on defense and think!"

What he could do now was stop the Mage City soldiers from dying in vain and buy them time. Though a general, he was still aware that he was not a peerless hero but little more than the average man his age.

Harghent looked up at the sky. If there was a single mind behind this faceless mass of force, then—

There's a wyvern circling the rear of the front line... If that's the one using the radzio to relay orders, then...there's got to be a commander wyvern somewhere. They have to be somewhere!

The swarm acted like a single organism, but at its core there needed to be a brain observing the situation and coordinating the flock.

As far as Harghent could tell, the commander was most likely not in Mage City. They were giving their orders somewhere in the skies between Mage City and Lithia. High up in the distant air. The wyverns' orders were coming from a place his hands could never reach.

In the current battle scenario, being one-sidedly targeted and suppressed from the sky, was outmatching such an enemy even possible? No, that wasn't the question Harghent needed to ask. Would he even be able to survive—?

A city guard looking at another corner of the sky spoke up.

"General Harghent. Over there."

"What is it?"

"Something's…flashing."

A delayed thud rumbled across the sky.

The Mage City guard saw the preceding lightning split the night heavens.

"What…?"

Harghent saw several of the wyvern soldiers become enveloped in bright flames and plummet to the ground.

The flash of lightning was not natural. It swept sideways across the sky. A magic bullet of rumbling thunder—with a lethal area of effect the single-target minia arrows could never hope to match.

"A magic bullet…?"

Breaking through the clouds and appearing in the middle of the aerial siege was a thin pair of wings. A wyvern.

A number of wyverns in the vanguard tried to rend the intruder with their claws.

The glowing sword blade, cutting through the blackness of night, arced out and killed all the assailants before they could get within range of the newcomer.

"No…"

The wyvern army flock grew agitated and scattered.

The intruder, with incomprehensible speed, cut down those who broke rank, shooting through in the blink of an eye and fragmenting the once-regulated flock. The blinding enchanted sword burned four of the wyvern soldiers with one flash of its blade. Gunshots resounded through the night sky, and the dispersing wyverns dropped from above, one after another.

An enchanted sword. Magic bullets.

Of course, Harghent thought, *he was always going to be there.* Harghent had said it himself.

“Alus the Star Runner…!”

Harghent had never faced a greater humiliation in his life than relying on the power of a wyvern champion.

However, he had also never wanted more for salvation. On this battlefield, the Sixth General wasn’t responsible for only his own life but those of the Mage City soldiers.

The wyvern troops had returned from their brief retreat to swarm the intruder. A whip, rushing freely through the air, pierced and chopped them to pieces. This magic item hadn’t been shown to Harghent on that fateful day.

Light flashed, gunshots split the air, glittering blades danced, and the deceased wyverns dropped from the air like tree leaves and falling snow.

The fearsome New Principality wyvern army looked like mere fodder before the exceptional individual, far superior to the average wyvern. The world’s strongest rogue, trampling many legends across the land—that was Alus the Star Runner.

“We can do this,” Harghent mumbled to himself.

“General. What is that? How…how should we move?”

“General Harghent!”

“Sixth General!”

Harghent looked over the Mage City soldiers, bewildered.

“Hold on… F-first, everyone needs to calm down.”

As a general, his instinct would be to invade the New Principality together with the detachment that Hidow had sent into action. However, he questioned if it was truly the correct course of action to send these soldiers —he himself having no troops of his own—who were merely clinging to his status as the Sixth General straight into the jaws of death?

For them, stamped out without any resistance and pelted by ludicrous aerial attacks, even a general as scorned as the Wing Clipper Harghent was enough of a presence for them to lean on as a crutch.

“Mage City is our homeland! We need a plan; we beg you!”

“If this is the New Principality’s doing…then they must pay!”

“Let me avenge the family I lost in the salvo! Please!”

Harghent looked at the faces of the Mage City soldiers. Deep in their eyes, he could see another emotion along with their resentment-fueled fighting spirit—fear.

The terror of the True Demon King lingered. One shape it took was madness to drive the mind to destruction.

If I don't persevere, the resolve of these soldiers will wither... But what of myself? Can I assure myself that I haven't been swallowed up in the chaos of war...?

Peeking out, he constructed in his mind an escape route from the siege. Harghent knew both the wyverns' strength and the range of their eyesight better than anyone. It would be next to impossible to lead such a number of soldiers through the raging battle, but the wyverns were currently concentrating primarily on the assault by Alus the Star Runner. These wyverns, the rulers of the sky, had judged the soldiers crawling on the ground to be powerless before them. Breaking through the siege wouldn't be impossible. So long as Harghent's friend was on their side.

"I… Hunting wyverns is my mission. I will crush their commander without question. However, you all are entrusted with protecting Mage City. Nevertheless...those who insist on fighting shall march to the New Principality. I, Harghent the Still, to the best of my abilities...shall lead those men forward."

◆

High overhead, Harghent attempted to break the siege.

Alus the Star Runner, alone, was luring in the wyvern force stubbornly flocking around him and cruelly exterminating them.

"Kraaaw, kra-kraaaw."

"Eradicate. Focus on…Alus the Star Runner…*hnggg*."

Hillensingen the Luminous Blade cut down three wyverns all at once and vaporized their bodies. Alus puzzled over the peculiar ways the wyvern soldiers would single-mindedly swarm him, without any concern for their own lives.

…It's strange.

Their maneuvers looked to be faithfully following the tactics of their leader, but the individual soldiers were clearly much less intelligent than wyverns in the wild. Although they had enacted a highly effective bombing strategy against those on the ground, they continued making the same meaningless attacks against him.

"Kraaa…krrrk. F-flee."

"……"

One of them answered his assumption with an inarticulate gurgle.

"You fled, didn't you, Alus the Star Runner."

Immediately, this wyvern had his head pierced with a bullet and was sent hurtling to the ground. Alus's wing sliced the air, and he turned his body around.

"Kio's Hand."

The whip extended from his hand with blinding speed, striking the wyvern soldiers around him as if it had a will of its own. One of them took such a severe hit that the shock tore him asunder, scattering his viscera. Alus opened up his other wing to stop his body from being blown back from the recoil. He took in the upward air currents from the burning Mage City beneath him.

"……What?"

As he continued his fight, an inexpressible and uncanny sensation fell over Alus.

"Looks like…you guys…know my name, huh…?"

"Kro-krooo!"

"Kr-kreekwaaaak!"

Alus wasn't sure what the earlier wyvern had been trying to say to him. Amid his rapid shifts from defense to offense, when even a single blink of an opening could be fatal, he thought maybe this odd sense of discomfort was itself the goal.

"……"

Even so, Alus had no intention of trading conversation in the first place. Wyverns as a race considered members of their kind simply enemies so long as they proved a threat.

"Faaah. You. Fled."

"……"

"From the swarm."

A new blade, sounding like a flute as it cut through the air, pierced the wyvern speaker in the flank. It was the second enchanted sword in Alus's possession. It went by the name Trembling Bird.

Alus looked down on the descending wyvern. They were merely following the orders of their leader. These suicide tactics, as well as the words coming out of their mouths, were entirely of another's will.

Why exactly were they so stubbornly charging at Alus, a simple intruder to their siege, and trying to exhaust him?

"…Really."

Alus the Star Runner's tone was always cheerless, and the wyvern didn't smile.

However, if he had ever once felt emotions bordering on scorn and ridicule, it was in that moment.

"…You say some worthless things, don't you…Regnejee?"

Alus loaded the next shot into his musket and aimed at a wyvern in the rear. He had long since determined where the operator was positioned, relaying commands from their leader through the radzio.

"……!"

Right before he pulled the trigger, though, Alus suddenly launched his whip. Apprehending an assailant approaching from his flank, the recoil from pulling the wyvern in made him slow to a stop in midair.

Immediately before, he'd felt an invisible vibration of some kind.

The wyvern soldier directly above him was sliced apart lengthwise by something sharp, revealing the invisible attack Alus had barely managed to dodge.

…That wasn't…a wyvern soldier…

He craned his neck toward the apparent origin of the attack below. On the ground, away from the burning Mage City, within the pitch-black night, twinkled an eerie red light. Alus's eyes could see it. They were sinister, like the eyes of a monster, eight in total.

There was another vibration, like the sounds of a violin string.

Another group of wyverns was completely cut apart. The true nature of the volley was impossible to see.

"……"

When Alus returned his gaze to the wyvern radzio operator he had been devising a way to deal with, he found his target, too, was already dead. In the single moment Alus had averted his attention, the technician had been shot down.

The glowing red eyes on the ground far below disappeared somewhere off into the night. The crashing sounds of trees being mowed down faded into the distance.

Launched without a sound, the method of attack that so precisely felled the wildly soaring wyverns was unknown even to Alus, who had faced off against numerous legends and emerged victorious.

Ignoring the Mage City soldiers, the attacks had been aimed solely at the air where Alus and the other wyverns had been. In other words, the red-eyed enemy was not a weapon on the side of the young emergent nation but instead an investment from Aureatia's side of the conflict.

The direction in which the mysterious presence was headed in was the same as where Alus needed to head to hunt down the wyvern commander.

"……The New Principality, then."

CHAPTER 18 Catastrophe

While Mage City was engulfed in the ravages of war, elsewhere…

…two people were dashing through the nightscape of the New Principality with bated breath. One was the Seventeenth Minister Elea the Red Tag. The young elf girl with her did not yet have a second name. However, this girl Kia was an almighty Word Arts user, known as the World Word, a fact known to a seldom few.

The citizenry of Lithia were absorbed in anxious conversations, conjecturing the truth behind the mysterious beam of light that had just flashed across the sky and the wyvern army that had flown off in the direction of Mage City. Thus, no one paid any heed to the two running against the crowds.

"Find Lana."

At Kia's whisper, a small patch of cloth floated into the air, as if come to life, and guided the two forward. The sight, looking like nothing more than a child playing games, made Elea once again fear the power of the World Word. Her omnipotent Word Arts were even capable of revealing unknown things to Kia.

"Kia. Please don't use any powers that'll draw attention to ourselves. We're only going to sneak into the bandits' hideout and rescue Lana. If there's a fuss, it'll put us and Lana in even more danger…"

"Isn't Lana your friend?! How can you say that at a time like this?!"

"Yes, well…I suppose you're right."

The truth was quite different. Right now, Elea's top priority was snuffing out Lana the Moon Tempest. If she had been killed immediately after being captured, there wouldn't be any need to rush through enemy territory and brave danger. All she could do was make for the captive and ensure there was no chance Lana was left alive.

"You two over there! What are you doing? Right now, the area around all military facilities is under high alert. Go back toward the city area imme—"

"He's with the bandits. Knock him out!"

"What…? *S-sleep.*"

Kia appeared slightly bewildered, but she was an elf child, unacquainted with wider civilization. Pressured by Elea's tone, she made the two patrolling guards fall unconscious.

A sturdy physique or technical skill with a sword or bow were all rendered meaningless before the power of the World Word. The power she held gave her the authority to negate such average ideas of strength through an entirely different axis.

Elea didn't immediately follow Kia as she continued on ahead, instead stopping and crouching down by the two unconscious soldiers.

"…? Elea, are you okay? U-um, so…I'll knock out all the bad guys, got it? Hurry up—let's go! Nothing you need to worry about!"

"…Yes, I'm fine. Sorry for slowing us down."

Elea raised her head and forced a distressed smile. She needed to make certain to dispose of anyone who witnessed Kia's Word Arts. After making the two soldiers swallow poison capsules, she knew they would never be opening their eyes again.

Kia's detection arts are guiding us down the shortest possible route. If that light earlier was a surprise salvo from the Cold Star, then most of these patrols should be rotating over to defend the city…

"It's on the other side of this wall. *Open a path.*"

Without a moment's hesitation, Kia used her Word Arts to create a passage that pierced right through the thick stone wall. Even with such a large-scale alteration, the phenomenon would appear before her words had left her mouth.

"From here on out, we need to make sure the bandits don't notice us. Can you make it so we're not visible to other people?"

"…I didn't consider that. *Conceal us.*"

From the shadows of the stone walls to the backs of the soldiers. The New Principality's defensive and labyrinthine construction worked entirely to the two's benefit. Kia's Word Arts had cleared every road to be as short as possible, and Elea's skills as a spy got past any contact with the soldiers. The few she reluctantly had to repel were all expunged, away from the eyes of others.

The pair continued through the military facilities, which were indeed on high alert, without being seen by anyone. It was an overly brash gamble, one that common sense would deem impossible, but what was truly terrifying were the World Word's Word Arts that made such an impossibility feasible.

Kia issued a command and was easily able to reposition the buildings themselves, shutting the path behind them.

"*Block the path.* This way, we won't have to worry about anyone following us. Well, not like it'd be a problem for me anyway."

"…When we head back, let's not close the roads behind us, okay? It'll cause problems for the people of the city."

"It's not like it's that big of a deal, though, right? They can just make new roads."

Finally, the two arrived in the basement of one of the military facilities. It appeared to be a jail for serious criminals, with heavy steel doors all lined up in a row.

"Lana must be in—"

"I know. It's this one. *Cut it.*"

With a single command, Kia sliced off the lock to the cell where Lana was imprisoned.

"We came to save you!"

In response to this sudden intrusion, the person sitting in the corner of the cell tensed and took in her visitors. Seemingly unable to believe her own eyes, she wrung out a timid question…

"……Kia?"

Lana looked to have endured fewer wounds than Elea had expected. When she considered that the salvo had been fired not long after Lana's capture, she imagined Taren's side also felt it necessary to move things along quickly, before Aureatia realized their informant had been captured.

"Kia. I'll look after Lana; you watch outside. There's a chance a guard might come by. If someone does show up, please make sure to let me know."

"Okay."

Lana didn't hide her trembling as she looked between the two in front of her.

"Elea, too… Why…?"

"Lana, can you stand up?"

"…N-no, wait, this isn't right."

Right before she grabbed Lana's outstretched hand, Lana stopped moving.

"Both of you…*how* did you get here?! Even if you mobilized every agent left in the New Principality, you couldn't have made it through all their defenses! Wh-why is Kia here, too…?!"

"……"

"…No, Elea, it can't be."

Lana's eyes were trained not on Elea, but Kia. Instructor Elea's small new student, with whom she had spent that afternoon playing.

She was scared. Terrified of the possibility that the all-powerful World Word, the almighty savant beyond all theoretical understanding, actually existed despite having gone undiscovered by the myriad search teams Taren had scattered across the world.

No one knew exactly what sort of appearance the being had. Moreover, no one would ever imagine an unassuming, ordinary young girl like Kia would be omnipotent.

"Y-you found her… A long—"

"Don't say another word. You'll aggravate your wounds."

Elea the Red Tag locked eyes with Lana crouched on the floor. She realized that by choosing to brute-force their way to her cell, she couldn't avoid exposing the truth to Lana herself.

The possibility was unlikely, given Lana's mental fortitude, but there was a chance she had already exposed pieces of Aureatia's strategy, and it was too late to silence her anyway.

It wasn't a problem either way—she had come to Lana's cell to shut her mouth for good.

She had already prepared a way to neutralize her without Kia realizing. Elea stretched her hand out to Lana's mouth—

“Someone’s here,” Kia whispered, standing just outside the hallway. Elea immediately looked toward her.

The torch farther down the hall was extinguished, and she could just barely make out a silhouette in the darkness. It did not belong to a minia. Covered in countless vines…it was the outline of a large mandrake.

“All the sentries on the route here were knocked out.”

The indifferent words echoed through the cold corridor.

Lana the Moon Tempest groaned with desperation.

“W-wait…Higuare.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“These two came to dispose of me. I haven’t told them anything! It’s the truth! D-did Taren…order you to kill me?!”

There wasn’t a shred of her usual aloofness in her tone.

The World Word may have possessed reality-bending Word Arts, the likes of which no one in their world could even imagine. Elea the Red Tag, the merciless intelligence commander, might even try to take the imprisoned Lana’s life this very minute.

However, even if that was the case… no matter how high a possibly that may have been, Lana knew for a fact that if Kia fought Higuare the Pelagic, she would die.

“I have a question. Who is that child?” asked Higuare mechanically, not a single trace of emotion in his voice.

“How did you make it this far?”

“…Elea.”

Kia grabbed the hem of Elea’s clothes. The young girl was unfamiliar with the present atmosphere—the sensation of death that sealed all futures, terribly far removed from her peaceful daily life.

“…That’s right, Higuare! Do you know?!” Lana prattled. She wanted to delay for as long as she could the moment Higuare drew his blades.

“Do you know the location of the World Word the New Principality was looking for?! They’re right—”

“Avert!” Kia shouted. Higuare’s enormous mass of vines burst forth violently, filling up the space of the corridor, now blocked off with nowhere to run, and were severed from his body. The surging wave stretched across their whole field of vision, with not only Kia but both Elea and Lana standing farther back inside the cell having nowhere to run.

His second name was Higuare the Pelagic. No matter how many creatures he faced, no matter how much distance they tried to put between them, even if they hid behind cover, there was none who could survive being swallowed up in the middle of his slashing attacks.

“……”

“What are you?”

Higuare peered into the depths of the viny sea filling the corridor.

A pair of impossibly clear turquoise eyes stared back at Higuare from over a shoulder, through the gap in her long blond hair.

"…No, *avert* wasn't the right word."

Kia gathered herself and took a deep breath.

"Protect us from all danger."

The vine's slashing attacks, which should have been impossible to evade, missed the three entirely.

While the result of tremendously precise Force Arts interfering directly with the trajectory of the mandrake's attacks, there wasn't a single person, including the World Word herself, able to perceive the entire process.

The girl had simply given a command to ensure the attacks *didn't hit them*.

"I see."

The gladiatorial mandrake flatly and frankly accepted the facts before him, like he always had. No matter what inconceivable superpowers he may be squaring off against, such situations had become commonplace for him.

"It seems the outside world's home to many techniques I have yet to understand."

His sole constant was the idea that the next match will be even more dangerous; this time it's your turn to die.

"I've come to learn something new. Thank you."

Therefore, he had naturally assumed there would be opponents he'd be unable to scratch with his lethal blades.

The leaves on the vines flooding the corridor opened slightly. The movement was extremely subtle, beyond the perception of an inexperienced young girl like Kia. Escaping from the tiny opening was a colorless and lethal poisonous gas.

It was one of the numerous trump cards Higuare the Pelagic concealed within him. The world's strongest mandrake, having trained himself over a long period of time, could manifest his race's unique lethal poison as a gas at will.

"If your Word Arts are triggered with speech, that means you need to breathe, yes?"

"…?"

Kia blinked repeatedly. She seemed to have no idea what was going on.

The vines that had stretched out to envelop the three of them were themselves the toxin's point of origin. In this confined underground space, it would instantly kill any living creature before they could take a second breath. It was already too late.

"I mean, of course I need to breathe."

"……"

The poison had no effect.

She opened her eyes and mouth in the poisoned air and spoke, as if nothing was awry.

"Didn't you hear what I said? *Protect us from* all *danger.*"

They might have been Thermal Arts that melted matter. Perhaps they were Life Arts to force a chemical reaction. A combination of the two, even.

Kia simply issued commands to enact her desired outcome. She composed an exceedingly complex process, utterly impossible for the average Word Arts user, to continuously dissipate Higuare's poison.

An all-powerful existence, eminently simple and therefore impossible to overcome.

Unassailable, due to her omnipotence.

"Just what…are you?"

For the first time, Higuare experienced the emotion fear. Even back when the threat of the True Demon King was right before his eyes, he had been a simple gladiator, accepting the reality before him to survive.

"……"

With his final words, he crumpled where he stood. Collapsing on the cold stone floor, he stopped moving.

Kia blinked once more.

"……Did you…kill him, Kia?"

Judging the supernatural clash over, Elea finally relaxed her defensive posture. The vines stuffing the corridor withered, reflecting the death of their host.

Even though Elea knew Kia's defenses were flawless, the mandrake had been the first fearsome opponent she had faced.

That's how it should have been. Kia's powers were on such an entirely different level, Elea couldn't even know if the skills she displayed here were the perfected limits of her abilities.

"Y-yeah… But I never said…anything like that. Is he really, truly dead…?"

"……."

An inscrutable enemy. And his mysterious death.

However, as she surveyed their surroundings, Kia realized there was something more important to worry about.

"E-Elea…! Where's Lana?!"

"……"

"While I was fighting just now…she ran off…!"

"Kia. We need to escape from here as soon as possible. Lana can definitely make it out on her own. Just getting her freed from her cell was great work."

"No way… There could still be dangerous people like that mandrake around, right?! I can't leave her behind! Lana's my friend!"

Elea looked at her own palm. Continuing the relentless pursuit of Lana would only lead to additional chances for the World Word to be exposed to more people. From the moment she had released Lana from her cell, Elea had achieved the bare minimum of her objectives.

"We need to go save her, Elea!"

"That's not…"

However. When her own pupil was entreating her from the bottom of her heart…as an educator tasked with mentoring her, how was Elea supposed to answer?

The elf girl's clear turquoise eyes looked up at Elea. She believed in her teacher with all her heart.

Elea thought her foolish. Her true character didn't feel a single ounce of guilt over tricking the naive Kia and using her for her own means.

"The two of us can totally do it."

"You…you really are quite the selfish child, aren't you, Kia?"

"I can act selfish with my teacher, can't I?"

◆

Higuare the Pelagic was dead. However, it was not the World Word who had killed him. That had been done by someone hiding around the corner, on the opposite side of Higuare from where Elea's group was located.

"Bwa-ha… Sheesh, and I was hoping to clean up these troublesome guys first."

A languid and self-deprecating chuckle slipped out.

"I don't know if it's lucky or unlucky that we got through it all without a fight."

He had come for Higuare. Thus, from his distant position, he had been unable to see the figures of Kia and Elea on the other side of the vine mass Higuare had launched down the corridor.

One possessed omnipotence itself, and the other could deal certain death.

There had been a paper-thin difference in timing that allowed the two wielders of absolute power to avoid bumping into each other.

"…Sorry, my mandrake friend. My angel's power is just as cowardly as mine, you see."

He was a man with a stubbly beard, wrapped in black clothes. There was one second where the mandrake's attention had been wholly consumed with Kia. The angel, wielding a blade of true instant death, greater than the daggers of the mandrake, didn't let that chance slip by.

What truly killed Higuare the Pelagic was his choice to attack by filling the underground corridor with poison gas…

The attack was a *malicious* one, enveloping everyone in its radius. Therefore, Nastique the Quiet Singer had been able to instantly appear at Higuare's back and pierce him with Death's Fang.

This didn't allow the mandrake time to diffuse his lethal concentration over to the man's distant position down the corridor.

"So anyone who tries to kill me? They all end up dead."

The other killer dispatched by Hidow the Clamp had arrived at the innermost section of the New Principality of Lithia.

The name of the assassin, cursed by the angel of death, was Kuze the Passing Disaster.

CHAPTER 19 Nihilo the Vortical Stampede

“What the hell is that?”

He could see the light of the New Principality. Soujirou grumbled with his sword slung over his shoulder.

After his fight with Shalk the Sound Slicer across the plain, Soujirou was now heading toward not the main headquarters inside the Mage City fortress but instead enemy territory, the New Principality of Lithia.

To the blade from another world, seeking only blood and swords, pursuit was his sole option. However…

“Damn…am I too late?”

The New Principality’s battle formation, a defensive line spread across the highway, was like a wall in scope. Earthen fortifications and barbed wire were laid out, with several archers and riflemen deployed on the sloping ground behind it all. While painstaking preparations had been made for open warfare, it showed how well trained Taren’s soldiers were, given the speed with which these defensive battle structures had been erected in the short time following the Cold Star’s surprise attack.

Additionally, those familiar with the New Principality of Lithia knew this highway en route the city entrance was already squarely within the eyes of their wyvern army. Should a large force invade, they would be immediately greeted by countless reinforcements from the skies.

Reaching Lithia with cavalry was no longer an option, doubly so by foot.

Nevertheless, Soujirou the Willow-Sword continued strolling ahead, casually closing the distance between himself and the defensive line.

“Hey!” the Visitor shouted loudly, sword still slung over his shoulder.

“Y’all gotta get outta my way for a bit. Cutting you down looks like it’ll be pretty boring, too.”

The reply came in the form of a hail of arrows and gunfire. It was more than enough to turn a person into a bloody mist, but Soujirou was clearly unscathed. An explosive crack of air was the only thing that signaled the supernatural speed of the Visitor’s sword strike.

“You only got seven shots at my body! If you’re gonna shoot, aim better!”

He didn’t stop walking for a single second. A soldier assembled on the front line then caught sight of Soujirou’s sword, as if by some mysterious destiny…

“…Y-you bastard! An Aureatia thug, are you?!”

“I told you to get outta the way.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Soujirou moved to cut down the soldier in front of him and proceed.

But he turned around right before he did.

“Hey. What’s with that noise?”

“Huh…?”

Before the soldier could react to the abrupt question, a colossal something, like a cannonball, came crashing down.

The encampment and everyone in it were smashed. The black mass came to a stop just below the incline of the slope, smashing the earth with a roaring crack, its back caked with the soldier’s blood.

“…What’re you all about?”

Soujirou had rolled to his side and sidestepped the blast. He had his sword at the ready.

What came flying out in front of him was an abomination, unlike anything he had yet seen in this world.

An arachnid colossus, so big he needed to crane his neck to look up at it. Its black metallic shell shined a mysterious rainbow color, reflecting the light from the city and the stars in the sky.

The monster began to speak.

“I am sorry for doing this to you all.”

Completely contrary to the spider’s appearance, it spoke with the charming voice of a young girl.

“But I’ll need you all to die. I have to make sure everyone can get through, okay?”

“Our g-gunshots…don’t affect it at all?!”

“We’ve been shooting at it nonstop! Ready the cannon!”

“Notify the wyvern patrol!”

Arrows poured down over the beast, and there was an unending stream of gunfire. Not a single method of attack from the New Principality soldiers had any effect. Neither did the behemoth use any supernatural evasion skills like Soujirou had moments earlier—the metallic armor was simply so abnormally strong. It nullified everything.

“Commence artillery!”

“Tee-hee-hee.”

With a clamorous concussive blast, high-explosive shells hailed down from the soldiers’ artillery positions. The explosions blasted away sections of ground and started to kick up gravel. The tarantula giggled, showing not even the slightest movements.

“Tee-hee, hee-hee-hee…”

Helneten the Burial. The tarantula modified into an organic battle tank, piloted by Nihilo the Vortical Stampede. Its armor was made from a mystical magic gem called deep celestial charsteel, and outside of direct processing by way master-level Craft Arts, neither normal force nor heat could even scratch it.

Furthermore, its pilot, Nihilo the Vortical Stampede, was a lifeless revenant, able to withstand the sudden speed shifts from Helneten’s unreasonable power output. This tank abomination, though requiring a pilot, didn’t have any air holes to let in a minimal amount of oxygen,

meaning it was covered in an impenetrable armor without a single weak point.

The ultimate land tank, more impregnable than even the Nagan Dungeon Golem.

"It's no use! Defensive line retreat—*ngggh!*"

"Gaaah!"

Helneten caught up with a group of soldiers in the distance with a single jump and crushed them underfoot. The monstrous amount of power output that moved Helneten's giant mass made its very form a murderous weapon.

The red eyes looked up to the sky, and the young girl spoke coolly.

"Are the wyvern soldiers here yet? If I don't take them down, I can't be the harbing—!"

The massive tarantula kicked the ground and fell back. The simple movement was enough to tear up a large amount of soil, mixing together with the flesh and blood of the soldiers in the tank's wake.

"Hey. C'mon…it's about time you answered my question."

The threat the girl had sensed came from a track suit–cloaked swordsman, who she'd assumed had gotten wiped out in the earlier artillery fire.

"What the hell are you?"

"I've heard about you. You're Soujirou the Willow-Sword. We're allies."

"Listen up, now. That ain't what I'm asking."

Soujirou lazily brought his sword down and looked out over the New Principality encampment, dyed with patches of blood and organs, flesh and fat. Soujirou, tasked with infiltration and assassination, had been unaware of the existence of this last resort called the Vortical Stampede.

Even had he known, however, as someone who sought out only powerful fighters to kill, it wouldn't have changed his actions.

Sauntering once again, he headed toward the ultimate ground tank. The M1 Abrams that Soujirou mentioned to Yuno in the ruined city of Nagan had been the main battle tank in the Beyond.

"Enough tearing up the place solo. If you wanna fight, then let's fight."

"Tee-hee… Why?"

"'Cause you're strong."

Soujirou instantly closed the distance between them and brandished his sword.

By the time his attack was complete, the tarantula had already retreated.

"…Are you really a minia?"

She hadn't intended on letting him get close enough to even unsheathe his sword. All she wanted to do was waylay the wyvern soldiers from her current position and bring them down without coming to blows with Soujirou.

The man didn’t seem to have any structural differences beyond a normal minia, unlike the modified corpses of Nihilo and Helneten. Nevertheless, his rush forward, the speed of his sword…

“You seriously like fighting that much? Are you crazy?”

“…Inside that body. I saw it. That’s your core,” he muttered, still positioned with the follow-through for his attack, looking downward.

“You only got *one* life, huh? Just one shared between that vehicle and the person inside it.”

“……!”

Nihilo the Vortical Stampede, in addition to boasting exceedingly sturdy armor, had several other mechanisms, too. However, there had never been anyone up until that point who could fathom this part of her inner design, especially not by looking at her from the outside.

Nihilo heightened her guard toward the Visitor. Even though they were allies, both working with Aureatia—*no*, she thought, that made him all the more dangerous.

The massive tarantula moved up to the top of the hill and looked down on Soujirou with its red eyes.

“I don’t intend on fighting you. Now that this encampment’s…”

There was a plucking sound, like a stringed instrument, and a group of New Principality marksmen was torn to pieces all at once. They were the last soldiers leftover from the giant spider’s massacre.

“…all cleaned up.”

With these final words, she turned in the direction of the New Principality and disappeared.

Having confronted her at point-blank range, Soujirou could see the true form of her attack.

“…String, eh? Shot some damn string at ’em.”

The warp threads of a tarantula’s webs boasted such durability, an ogre’s Herculean strength wasn’t enough to pull them apart, while the weft threads possessed a sharp edge that could easily slice through a wyvern, bones and all.

This artillery functionality, firing threads and boasting the precision and range to fell wyverns in the night sky, was one of the mechanisms that made Nihilo the Vortical Stampede into the invincible tank she was.

Furthermore, separate from such weaponry, she, as a construct, had her greatest function of all—

“Huh?”

As she continued trampling toward the city lights, Nihilo sensed something was off.

She could feel the abnormality in her mount Helneten, through the nerves extending from her spine.

“There are *three* eyes missing.”

Was it possible the overly sharp cut had remained closed until that moment? Or did the supernatural flash of the otherworldly deviant’s sword

manage to leave its opponents unaware they had even been cut? Helneten's head had been sliced through diagonally and lost three of its eyes.

The armor enveloping Helneten was created from a mystical magic gem known as deep celestial charsteel. Normal force and heart were unable to scratch it—or so she had thought.

"Soujirou the Willow-Sword. With that step forward, he cut through my head without my even realizing it… Tee-hee-hee."

Nihilo simply laughed after becoming aware of the wound.

Helneten darted, trampled, and shot down the wyvern soldiers covering the sky one after another with its five eyes. Even after losing half its head, the tarantula's movements showed not even the slightest sign of faltering.

The bodies of both revenants, Nihilo and Helneten, were already long *dead*. On the other hand, just as a golem wouldn't know death as long as it had its core animating it, as long as the revenant's vitality core was intact, they were *alive*.

Controlling life was one of the end goals the creators of constructs sought to achieve. Techniques that borrowed another's existence, separate from the creator themselves, and giving it life was another route to that extreme end.

Helneten's vitality core was its very pilot, housed within its armored exterior.

"Well then…it seems there's another one out there capable of killing me, Kuze."

A shared curse. As long as the driver, Nihilo, was in one piece, the Vortical Stampede was immortal.

She was dead and, therefore, adapted to the speed and colossal force of her mount, its walking force enough to bring topographical destruction.

She possessed artillery mechanisms, bringing instant death from a distance, cutting apart whole armies with a single web.

She had both armor that insulated her against any and all regular attacks, while also simultaneously being an unstoppable immortal herself.

Though given two bodies, they were an atrocity-summoning cavalry, wanted solely for their function to trample everyone before them underfoot.

The revenant and the cataphract.

Nihilo the Vortical Stampede.

CHAPTER 20 Foul Weather

At the same time as hostilities kicked off on the ground, the wyvern soldiers in the sky above the New Principality had a different threat to attack, and they assembled to face it.

The demolition squad that had stormed Mage City in advance of the salvo from the Cold Star was under attack by an intruder from the sky and on the verge of being completely wiped out.

Right then, as he waited for his enemy's arrival, Regnejee declared to all his wyvern subordinates:

"His strongest weapon is Hillensingen the Luminous Blade. The moment he draws his sword, a blade of light extends outward. The reach of his slash is four meters. There's no need to watch out for this attack. If he gets in a clean hit, you're as good as dead. His other enchanted sword is Trembling Bird. It creates this noisy din while it flies about on its own. Assume that there are two enemies instead of one. Divide the force and have a group keep this sword in check."

It was outside Regnejee's predictions that Alus the Star Runner didn't appear directly over the New Principality of Lithia, given the position of the Cold Star, but nevertheless, things were moving along even *better than he could've expected*.

He had been able to pick up on the special characteristics of a majority of the previously unknown magic items that Alus the Star Runner had at his disposal. By the time he had incorporated the news of the demolitions team's engagement and subsequent defeat into his strategies, he had already finished preparing for another.

"He has a magic whip called Kio's Hand. It has a range of at least twelve meters. There are times he uses it to close off his vicinity and protect himself. In those situations, its effective range is cut in half or more. This is the attack you need to be wary of. Twelve meters. Repeat what I said, scum."

"*Krak*, twelve…meters."

"Twelve…"

"*Gwwwark*, don't g-get close."

"Got that down? His main weapon, the gun, has a farther range than that. A grazing shot from its poison bullets is enough to give you an agonizing death, and he has magic bullets of roaring lightning that fire thunderbolts. If you keep interfering with his shooting stance or his reloading, you can disrupt these attacks. Disruption will be outside a twelve-meter radius, while those given the 'death role' will attack all at once in groups from a six-meter radius."

"Operation…u-understood…"

“*Kree-kree-kreeee…!* Attack Star Runner!”

Alus the Star Runner was an unrivaled rogue. He outstripped and easily dominated many legends who had previously made names for themselves across the world.

However, the conditions for Regnejee the Wings of Sunset—and the wyvern soldiers he commanded—were different. They had anticipated the unbeatable rogue’s raid. They had also gained complete knowledge over Alus’s numerous methods of attack and could meet them with their own tactical answers.

The wyverns need no champion. I will end this right here, right now.

He saw slender wings swoop in, the moonlight of the big and small moons both shining behind them.

The one who brought legends to an end. Alus the Star Runner.

“Now…it’s been a while since I’ve seen your face. You’ve been running away for quite a long time, haven’t you, Three-Armed Alus?”

Regnejee sneered, full of malice.

“Finally returned to the flock, have you? Even scum like you is welcome—to *my flock*. I’ll go ahead and put you in charge of provisions.”

“……Be quiet.”

Gunshots. It was hard to believe the lightning speed of the rapid fire was occurring in midair.

Regnejee, opening up enough distance, used another soldier as his shield. He was always positioned near the center of the flock, and he assembled them in a formation to prevent any direct shots from reaching him.

“*Kwa-ha-ha!* Oh, are you angry? No, of course not, right? You don’t have enough brains in there to be angry. Born that way! Stuck crawling on the ground, barely able to ride a wind current! A three-armed reject, that’s what you are. I know all about you.”

Alus tried loading his next bullet. Several wyverns swarmed him, drawing his attention and interfering with his reloading. There was a group that dived down below and passed under him. On the backs of their armor, engraved with the New Principality’s crest, were burning bundles of straw, the acrid smoke blocking Alus’s vision for a quick moment.

He soared downward diagonally and escaped. Regnejee’s tactics had accounted for his path of retreat away from this snare, too.

“Why do you think we were waiting for you here in Lithia?”

“……!”

Faster than Alus could regain his bearings, gunshots rang out in succession. He evaded by contorting his body, and one of the bullets just barely grazed his skin.

The attack wasn’t anything special. A simple volley of gunfire. However, it hadn’t come from the wyverns in front of him.

Looking downward, Alus saw the glint of numerous gun barrels on the spires lining Lithia.

“Only a fool would think of using a gun himself—you know that, Alus?”

Driven back by the enemy in the air, the sniper attacks could kill him from his disadvantageous position. An effective strategy.

The wyvern soldiers again began dispersing smoke. The straw they burned also served as guiding lights to the soldiers on the surface, showing them Alus’s position. The gunshots from the towers continued without pause. Cycling out soldiers as they reloaded, the attacks went on in succession.

…If I break through an opening in their defense net— No.

One of the wyvern soldiers flew forward, challenging him to a close-quarters fight with his talons. It was a decoy. Alus knew that if he stopped his wings to deal with the challenger, he’d be brought down.

…What weapons can I use…at this range?

With his luminous blade and Kio’s Hand, he tried to regroup and start again. However, the enemy didn’t approach close enough for him to catch multiple wyverns in his attack. Faster than he could devise his next plan, the onslaught assailed him.

Smoke. Gunfire. Claws.

“Kekexy ko khar.” (From Regnejee to Lithia’s winds.)

Then Word Arts.

“……Irritating…”

“Kent kakor. Kokket korp. Kokaito.” (Returning mirror plate. Stringed sun. Shine.)

Alus avoided the red light of Regnejee’s Thermal Arts. A bullet tore a section of his wing. It was a premediated hit—to create a second to shift to the offensive. He began moving into his stance to let his sword fly.

“Trembling Bird…!”

With a shrill, piercing scream, the enchanted sword flew off. A section of Regnejee’s swarm responded immediately and intercepted the enchanted sword with their claws. The blade changed its arc in midair after being brought down and returned to Alus’s hand.

It was clear from the group’s immediate response that they were trying to capture the enchanted sword for themselves. Alus decided it was best to avoid using Trembling Bird recklessly during the fight.

“Kokket korp. Kokaito.” (Stringed sun. Shine.)

A tapered red light.

Regnejee again completed his incantation. Alus dodged the deadly light beam.

He couldn’t afford to take a single direct hit. He simultaneously needed to pay attention to the flow of battle and the enemy force itself, close to a hundred strong, and couldn’t afford to lose focus… “……”

Alus produced a small magic tool, resembling an urn.

The wyvern soldiers’ saturation attack continued mercilessly, constantly forcing Alus to deal with every assault levied against him. As a collective, the soldiers experienced no fatigue. They wouldn’t stop until Alus was dead.

“Having too much trouble to talk now, huh?” Regnejee taunted.

“Alus. Three-Armed Alus. You want the Cold Star? *Kwah, ha.* Let me try guessing what you’re thinking. You’re thinking how if you just had that Cold Star in your hands right now, aren’t you? Frustrating, isn’t it? Though…I doubt your brain’s even developed enough for an emotion like that!”

“…The Cold Star, huh…?”

If he had the city-leveling beam of light or a dragon’s destructive breath attack, he could’ve swept Regnejee’s whole army away at once.

The claws and guns urged him on.

Alus evaded the attacks, using the recoil from Kio’s Hand like a second tail. Although unable to catch and pull in midair enemies, by utilizing it this way, he was able to freely change his direction mid-flight.

“…Kekexy ko khar.” (From Regnejee to Lithia’s winds.)

Then, in the midst of his sudden evasive actions, something resembling small pieces of coal spilled out from Alus’s urn and fell down to the New Principality streets below. It was an attack of his own.

“Even without it…”

Flames rose up below his eyes.

“Kent kakor.” (Returning mirror plate.)

“…I can still wipe out a country, *Ground Runner*.”

The line of flames ran a direct path forward.

Regnejee looked down at what was happening. The charcoal that Alus was dumping below, bright fireballs that ran through the streets at high speeds, was spreading throughout the city. It was another of Alus the Star Runner’s magic items and one he had kept secret in Mage City.

Flames that seemed to travel of their own volition, growing stronger as they fanned out over the city. Its name was Ground Runner.

It’s only the urban areas. There aren’t any military facilities there. A meaningless attack. But Curte…

Even locked in a desperate fight to the death, Regnejee’s mind first turned to the one spire directly connected to the central stronghold.

…It won’t spread to Curte’s location. Only ones who’ll die are the minia civilians.

His sight relief was also an opening. The magic whip Kio’s Hand silently stretched out from Alus’s grip, piercing the cervical spine of the soldier Regnejee was using as a shield.

“……Sixteen meters. *Kwah, ha…* You were hiding your maximum range after all, weren’t you, Alus?”

When the wyvern leader was attacked, the closest soldier to him would sacrifice themselves—unflinchingly and unperturbed by death.

“A meaningless and shallow tactic in the end.”

“…What’s with them…?” Alus questioned as he continued to shoot down enemies, weaving his reloading in between gaps in his opponents’ barrage. The hole from the lost individual would immediately be replaced by another wyvern, and Regnejee’s tactical operations were entirely unaffected.

“These aren’t wyverns…”

“*Kwa-ha-ha.* Want me to tell you? I’m using Life Arts to mess with their heads. I’ll do the same to you.”

“……You’re lying.”

Life Arts involved skills able to enact restorative changes on cellular and biological activity, but they couldn’t distort the brain functions of advanced intelligences. Wyverns were different from bugs and fish. They were able to comprehend Word Arts.

A genius who could lead armies with his exceedingly high intellect and even cooperate with the minia races. Wyvern soldiers who, as a result of painstaking terror and oppression, served without fear of death.

This completely unexplainable abnormality was the very core of Regnejee’s army.

This leader, who’d had a majority of his original swarm annihilated by the True Demon King, had rebuilt it into an aerial force the size of a nation in only four short years.

“You started talking again… Trying to buy time, Three-Armed Alus?”

Alus’s luminous blade warded off the spray of gunfire. He then took emergency maneuvers to evade four shots beset on him at once. Then another gunshot. Evade. Repeat. He wasn’t given a moment’s rest.

Alus’s eyes flickered around the area, searching for a needed path of escape from the gunners’ lines of fire.

The besieging web of wyverns had formed again. There were no holes to slip through.

“…Are you stupid?! *Kwa, hwa, kwa!* With every passing second, you take one step closer to your demise! This is the New Principality! They can deploy as many minia marksmen as they need! They’ve been gathering in this area ever since you arrived, fool!”

“……You always…talk so much, Regnejee.”

“Indeed. Repent. Accept defeat. That’s why I’m talking to you. To make sure you realize how wrong you are and that you’re incompetent garbage. Listen, Alus. Listen and really think it over. You were strategically outmatched before you even arrived.”

Up until that moment, Alus hadn’t been able to topple the leader, Regnejee. Neither had he been able to greatly decrease the wyvern army’s numbers, either, as he had during his engagement over Mage City.

Thus, no matter how much longer this went on, Alus the Star Runner couldn’t overcome the current situation.

The density of the long-range attacks from the surface was increasing slowly, and the wyvern army restricting Alus’s movements was cycling through its soldiers to rest and recover their strength. Meanwhile, Alus was constantly pressured to keep evading attacks, extremely taxing on his reflexes and concentration, and eventually (or even sooner), failure would come.

Whether gunshots from average soldiers, without any special proficiency, or talons of rank-and-file wyvern soldiers, it didn't matter when a single direct hit spelled death.

An army that crushed champions. Such was the strategy of the wyvern commander, Regnejee the Wings of Sunset.

"……Yeah. Time."

Alus grunted, sounding exceedingly somber.

He folded his wings. There was only one meaning behind folding the wings, meant to be filled with the wind and air. Regnejee was suspicious.

A nosedive?

It was an act of suicide. Alus the Star Runner abandoned control over his own flight.

"…I needed time."

The moment he spoke the words, Alus was hit in the back by successive gunfire. One shot. Two shots.

Five shots were direct hits. Alus was able to keep evading the previous gunfire entirely due to his knowledge-bending mobility, and with his simple, straight plunge down, the soldiers of the New Principality had no trouble hitting their mark.

"That's it, then."

Alus the Star Runner continued his descent.

He remembered the scene of days gone. The sea cliffs. Wings flying off into the sun, high in the sky.

The one who abandoned his flock as a right of the powerful and the one who protected the flock under the sense of responsibility his power bestowed on him.

Which one had managed to obtain something of true value?

"…I was right."

The descending wyvern vanished into the sea of flames razing the town.

Flames. Spreading flames.

"…!"

Regnejee became aware of a certain possibility. He shouted to his flock of followers.

"…Everyone, drop down and pursue him! Assume he's survived and surround Alus the Star Runner! If you find him, don't move from your position! Even if it means your life, understand?"

"L-life… Kra-kwaaah."

"*Krrrk*, encircle, u-understood…"

"Don't repeat things! Hurry up and get after him, fools!"

The sky army began their descent, like a wave crashing, and dove down between the gaps in the city spires.

Assuming there was a deeper purpose to his actions, that would mean from the moment Alus the Star Runner released his fire…he had planned for this.

Then Regnejee saw the flash of an enchanted sword in a corner of the city.

The light signaled Alus the Star Runner's survival. It was Hillensingen the Luminous Blade.

◆

History's most powerful rogue, in addition to possessing various offensive magic items, was also equipped with magic items to ward against attacks. The ornament he wore, a circular pendant, was called the Greatshield of the Dead.

Previously, when he'd brought low Vikeon the Smoldering, the truly invincible magic tool had nullified the dragon's black breath and protected not just his body but the periphery around him, too.

While it shielded him, the immense erosion and pain that occurred as compensation for its activation rendered him unable to fly or attack, but as long as he was in the middle of a rapid descent, this wasn't a big drawback.

"Found him! *Kraaa-kraaak*, found Alus the Star Runner!"

"P-p-pursuit… Go!"

The wyvern soldiers swarmed Alus as he flew at low altitude, weaving through the city. Alus found both their speech and behavior altogether unusual. It struck him less that they were unintelligent but more that their language ability was simple and invariable.

"……Really creepy."

Kio's Hand, launched from Alus's hand, pierced through three wyvern soldiers simultaneously, sending them crashing into the river.

The streets were turned into a sea of fire. Ethereal flames ran through the city. Alus controlled the Ground Runner, setting fire to more of the city and hindering the ground forces' rapid response.

That was his plan.

If sniper fire from the minia was Regnejee's method of attack, then he simply needed to *fully dismantle the means*.

Instead of high up in the air, where they could target him from the numerous spires, he flew low. He lured enemies into the spaces between the spires and other buildings, defeating them all one by one, now that they were cut off from the marksmen and their reinforcements. He had used his trump card in the Greathshield of the Dead because he had bought enough time to allow the Ground Runner's fireballs to spread.

"Consider the source and take countermeasures."

They were words his minia friend had once told him.

Even while he faced off against famous legends across the world, Alus the Star Runner was always thinking and always forming countermeasures.

He believed that itself was true strength.

"…I'll counter this. That's right…"

"Did you think you could escape?"

The voice came from behind him. Alus craned his neck to face it.

Regnejee was descending upon him, accompanied by several dozen other wyvern soldiers.

“I didn’t escape the flock like you did. That’s why…your escape ends here. You’re going to be killed by the same swarm you escaped.”

“…You say *escape*, but…you escape from your *enemies*, you know,” Alus replied sullenly.

“…So that means you think of your own swarm as your enemy.”

“Scum.”

The independent rogue never once cared about his swarm. From birth, he had been a heretic, outside the wyverns’ realm. To Alus, Regnejee’s insistence on belonging to the swarm, after so many decades had passed, was nothing more than a joke.

“Here is where you burn to death, Three-Armed Alus.”

The vanguard wyvern soldiers went into action. Their monotonous advance was easily knocked down with a flash from the luminous blade.

The lower altitude, lined against the buildings, made it impossible to pressure Alus on all sides like the wyvern soldiers had done before. They were forced to settle on a single direction. The carcasses of the wyvern soldiers descended to the city streets…

…and then burst.

“……Explosives.”

The abrupt blast caused his stance to falter, and in that second moment, the next charge came rushing at him. A mad army, where no one valued their lives. In essence, they were charging at him *precisely to die*. Diving into the conflagration, simply so Alus would be caught in the aftermath of their explosions.

“…What is this?” Alus spoke with irritation while holding off against the nightmarish and relentless assault.

“……This is absurd… These aren’t wyverns…”

They weren’t free. The soldiers had none of it—none of the traits wyverns possessed that made them wyverns.

The explosions continued. The luminous blade glimmered, rending the air in a flash.

“*Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!* That’s right! They aren’t wyverns *anymore*!”

There was a disquieting sound of wings that Alus hadn’t heard until then.

“Kekexy ko kuyukha. Kirikiker. Kenhaor—” (From Regnejee to the Eupa wings. Dizzying canopy. Damp money—)

Mixed up with all the chaos, a battle-deciding situation unfolded.

At the center of the force, Regnejee spread his wings wide.

“—Kotastenon—”

There was smoke trailing up among the red flames. Though, this wasn’t smoke but an extremely small and fine type of swarm. Wyverns weren’t the only *things* residing within the spires, towering over the New Principality of Lithia.

Regnejee the Wings of Sunset released another army that lurked within the city.

“Fool. You’re a pathetic idiot. Did you think you fled in this direction of your own volition? Why don’t I tell you something interesting—?”

“…!”

Alus twisted his body in midair. The smoke was poisonous. He felt a definite foreign substance infiltrating his body with every breath.

“A certain species of pincer bugs is naturally attracted to the smell of burning pollen. These bugs are being controlled by my Life Arts. Back in Mage City, you burned through quite a number of my soldiers, eh?”

“……Gnnnaaak.”

“You’ve inhaled smoke from the kindled straw. The residue from those suicide explosions is stuck to your lungs, too. Those suicide attacks led you here, to the bugs’ hunting ground, flanked by their nests on all sides. Those puny thoughts of yours…from the very start, anything and everything has been entirely in line with my predictions. I don’t need nearly as many of them, compared to poison gas, to be effective.”

The bugs noisily began overtaking Alus. The soldiers’ forward charges had all been to pin Alus down at that location so the nauseating insect swarm could take hold of him.

His mobility couldn’t do anything to shake off the insects gathering inside his body. He couldn’t incinerate them with his luminous blade, either. Neither gunshots nor whip attacks was an effective solution.

“What do you think will happen?” Regnejee jeered, looking down from high above at the rogue, in agony but still continuing to put up a fight.

The New Principality of Lithia’s airborne army was a swarm of wyverns deprived of their own will. What exactly had the genius leader done to maintain his flock, despite having it taken from him during the True Demon King disaster?

“They’ll bite through your palate and nostrils…before *devouring the freewill center of your brain*.”

Regnejee the Wings of Sunset was a genius beyond compare.

A Life Arts prodigy, capable of conferring behaviors and traits to insects unimaginable in the natural world. That was the true form of his abnormal power to command a flock and make them transcend their natural instincts.

By controlling bugs to debase other wyverns until they had truly insectile cognitive function, he was able to give them a Life Arts treatment, instilling a blind subservience within them. He absorbed a number of other wyvern flocks like this, thus creating his current army.

A command of wyverns. Also capable of ruling over a horde, exceedingly animalistic in nature—a tamer.

“Let me guess what you’re thinking right now.”

“…What…think…?”

“That’s right. Unlike earlier, I’ve come up to the front so my Life Arts can reach you. You think you can just use your last spurt of strength to attack me by surprise and cut off the head of command, don’t you?”

“…Countermeasure…”

If the insects were blocking Alus’s respiratory tract, making it impossible to breathe, that meant there was little time left before they tore through his palate and infiltrated his brain. Though it was possible that, deprived of oxygen, the deluge of wyvern soldiers would tear him to shreds first.

“……!”

“Draw your enchanted light sword.”

The rogue unsheathed his enchanted light sword and slashed at Regnejee. A gamble in his final moments. Regnejee had seen right through this, too. Using several wyverns as sacrifices, he escaped upward, along the terrain.

“Meaningless, scum.”

Even if he managed to kill Regnejee, it wouldn’t change Alus’s doomed lot.

The bugs had already infiltrated his body. Their Life Arts–bestowed directives wouldn’t disappear even if the Life Arts user was eliminated. He would simply have his brain devoured from the inside, helpless to do anything to stop them.

“Kekexy ko kuyukha. Kirikiker. Kenhaor. Kotastenon.” (From Regnejee to the Eupa wings. Dizzying canopy. Damp money. Disturb.)

Alus shivered as, once again, even more bugs swarmed his body.

His attempt to close the distance with his final struggles and the position he flew into had both been within Regnejee’s expectations as well. From the start, Alus’s attack was never going to reach Regnejee, protected in his defensive formation.

His final attack sapping his remaining strength, the enchanted light sword slipped down from Alus’s hand. His musket and the sack that collected his limitless magic items dropped to the ground.

The magic items, the foundation of Alus the Star Runner’s unparalleled power—

“……”

Alus vacantly looked up to the sky above.

It was no longer within reach.

“Your life was meaningless. The treasures you collected and your fame, too,” Regnejee said, looking down at Alus.

“Do you know how to sing? I found a real treasure. Greater than any of yours.”

“……Upward,” Alus muttered as the swarming bugs obstructed his breathing.

He wasn’t looking up at Regnejee.

“……I thought…”

Instead, he was looking at the spire behind him.

“What…? I’ve had you beaten from the very—”

Moving their fighting to the lower altitudes meant there was a spire in every direction. The nation of the New Principality of Lithia had these wyvern lodgings sprouting up all over the city, like a forest.

Realizing where Alus’s eyes were fixed, Regnejee also turned to look at the spire behind him.

“……”

He turned to regard the blind spot at his back, where, as long as he watched Alus from up above and was protected by the wyvern formation, he didn’t need to worry about any danger.

Just what was Alus the Star Runner talking about? If Regnejee had to guess what the other wyvern was thinking, then—

—I thought you’d flee upward.

“I’ve won already, though.”

Enormous flames were pouring down from the spire’s peak.

The magic item of flame, which moved in accordance with its owner’s will—Ground Runner.

Rushing from inside the spire up into the heavens, it burned Alus and Regnejee together, both located at the zenith of the magic item’s path, with its monstrous heat.

“…You talk too much, Regnejee.”

The showdown with the wyvern leader was decided. Alus looked at the dozens of wyvern soldiers, hollow shadows of what they once were, piled on the ground. A light cough, and pieces of seared bug carcasses fluttered down.

Despite having his body engulfed in the roaring blaze, Alus’s only injuries were the burns inside his respiratory system from breathing in the blistering air. The instant before he was going to be incinerated with his opponent by his own attack, he activated the only remaining magic tool he had left—the Greatshield of Death.

Sitting at a distance beyond the range of his attacks. A lethal swarm of bugs buried inside his body.

Alus hadn’t predicted either of these gambits. Nevertheless, he was a rogue who had *invariably responded* to every single battle scenario, no matter how far beyond his abilities of conjecture, he had ever faced.

“……If you’d kept quiet, I would’ve had a bit more trouble.”

—Minimal defensive coverage. To protect *only himself*. The flames he had purposefully rained down had incinerated everything but his own body, with the swarm of insects invading him unsparingly exterminated.

He had needed to temporarily forfeit the enchanted sword and sack to ensure they weren’t caught up in the river of flame.

“……”

Flying down, he recovered his treasures.

Meanwhile, a winged silhouette departed into the night sky, leaving the fire-scorched earth behind.

From the ground, engulfed in the conflagration, Alus saw a winged silhouette depart into the night sky.

His whole body covered in severe burns, Regnejee seemed to be flying toward the central stronghold's spire.

The wyvern who'd chosen freedom simply watched him depart. Though it was not an act of mercy.

"……Farewell."

◆

The Lithia nighttime, once bustling with activity, was now even brighter, though the illumination came from flames of destruction.

Many houses burned in the chaos, with citizens unable to find anywhere to hide, terrorized not only by the flames but the colossal tarantula that had broken through the defensive line and the military force that had infiltrated the city after it.

Two figures were running through the spectacle, shimmering in the heat.

"Elea! The city's burning! Wh-where did this fire come from?!"

Elea grimly surveyed the scene. Right now, the head of operational command in Mage City was the Twentieth Minister Hidow. Even if she assumed he had mobilized his forces in response to the Cold Star's surprise attack, he was not the type of man to go with any operation that involved reducing residential areas to ash.

In other words, this inferno is either due to the Mage City soldiers running wild or a separate factor… Did some other force start the fire? Whatever the cause, Aureatia is probably going to take advantage of the confusion to bring down the New Principality…

The situation was swiftly deteriorating. If the soldiers indeed were running amok, allies or not, they were dangerous.

"…Elea."

Out in front, Kia abruptly stopped.

Her gaze had landed on two soldiers heading in their direction, and they clearly didn't belong to the New Principality.

They seemed to have gotten separated from the main force's movements and were conversing with each other, their bloodied swords hanging low in their hands.

"Hey. Look. There's a woman. She's a New Principality girl, yeah?"

"Stop. Focus on the task at hand. She's not even a soldier."

"Like I give a damn! Our city was destroyed by these bastards! They're all guilty!"

One of the men raved, his eyes bloodshot. Elea could hear Kia gulp, faced with the threat before them.

Elea looked for an escape route. It didn't appear that many roads had been spared from the spreading fire, but they weren't in true danger. With

the power of the World Word, it would be simple to drive the two men back, but—

If they're Mage City soldiers, they're allied with Aureatia... I need to dispose of every witness of the World Word's power, but without some excuse, it'll prove thorny down the line...

"You two… Okay, girls, stay right there…!"

The agitated man brandished his sword and threatened the pair. He began to draw closer.

Kia spoke up with a bit of a tremor in her voice.

"Elea."

She only needed to give Kia her permission, and she could easily render the man powerless. Kia simply saying the words *don't move* would do the job.

"Hold on, Kia. I… First, let me try talking to him."

"What do we have here? Fighting over girls at a time like this?"

"Huh?"

Elea heard the low voice come from directly behind her—without any prior warning to its presence at all.

Abruptly wheeling around, she saw a skeleton wrapped in a tattered cloak lingering behind her. She had absolutely no idea how or when he had gotten so close.

The skeleton twisted his white spear and turned his hollow black sockets toward the men.

"Sounds fun. Let me join in."

"Stay out of it! A construct bastard like y—"

His words were cut off. His tongue was sent flying, together with his decapitated head.

"Eek!"

The other man was given only enough time to react to the tragedy. His carotid artery had been sliced through, mere seconds prior.

No one there even registered the spear's movements. Between the skeleton and the soldiers, there were two houses' worth of distance, with Elea and Kia standing in the middle.

"Now then."

Beside the corpses, the skeleton slung his spear on his shoulder and appeared to size up Elea and Kia.

The name of the spearman, the architect of the scene of slaughter before them, was Shalk the Sound Slicer.

"Neither of you look to be from Lithia, either. Who are you?"

"……"

"Silence, eh? Literally quieter than the dead, aren't you?"

As he joked, Shalk twirled his long spear around again.

Even Elea the Red Tag could plainly tell just from the skeleton's presence—the opponent before her was on an entirely different level than

any warrior she had seen. If he felt like it, resistance or escape would be impossible for Elea and Kia.

We need to act first—have her tell him die.

Even constructs created from carcasses had a transient life, formed from Word Arts. The World Word's orders still should have an effect. But would Kia be able to say it fast enough?

This skeleton's spear was faster than speech. Could she direct Kia's actions without speech?

"I—"

Kia spoke up, her voice stiff.

"I came from the Eta Sylvan Province to study. This woman, she's my teacher…so, um, you saved us…right? Thank you."

"……"

"But."

Kia's turquoise eyes looked at the two, now silent, soldiers.

"But I don't think you needed to kill them, you know."

Shalk briefly stopped moving.

"Kia!"

"What? He didn't! They hadn't done anything! We could've handled it much better ourselves!"

"Heh-heh. Ha-ha-ha-ha."

The skeleton's shoulders shook. He was laughing.

"…You're right. That little lady there is right."

Again shouldering his blood-dyed spear, Shalk pointed off in one direction.

"The New Principality soldiers are evacuating people to the east side. They'll get you out. The fire over there is still faint."

"……What's…your name?"

"It's gone. At least, the one I had when I was alive is."

Dodging a clash with the fearsome spearman, the two took a moment to hide themselves in an alleyway. They needed to pay attention to avoid more encounters like the last one.

"…Kia. You really should escape with me. I understand you're worried about Lana. But you see now, don't you? This…isn't the time for childish self-indulgence."

Elea crouched down and rubbed Kia's cheek. The young girl nodded.

"…You're right."

—Kia knew nothing—that the horrible sights before her were scenes of war or that the woman she was trying to save, Lana, was a target Elea needed to kill. She was a foolish elf from a primitive forest who didn't even think of questioning anything. Still, though, Elea asked herself—

What if I were her?

If at some point…there had been a single person, an adult she could trust, to shield her from the malice in the world, how would she have ended up?

No…I'm sure I would have had an even more wretched life. No one is on your side in this world. All I have is my own power. I, with my own hands, will find happiness…

Elea's mother, a prostitute, had been kept as a mistress to an Aureatia aristocrat and had lived out her days without ever earning a single reward. Elea had no intentions of ending up the same way. Making use of every possible method at her disposal while shouldering dirty work like assassination and espionage, she had finally seized her chance.

The World Word. Truly genuine and unparalleled power, for Elea's sake.

The girl glanced up and looked Elea in the eyes.

"…Still, please let me save her."

"Kia…"

"I can't stand it… I can do anything, except save a friend? If I don't do something here, I just know when I grew older…I'll definitely regret it."

Kia's small fingers grasped Elea's hand on her cheek.

"So come with me. *Teacher.* I'll protect you, so watch me do the right thing. I want you to come with me no matter what…Elea!"

"……"

Elea closed her eyes as an inexplicable idea, irrational even to herself, came into her head.

She had no reason to dispose of Lana the Moon Tempest. Lana wouldn't be able to go back to either Aureatia or the New Principality now. There would be no reason to tell anyone about Elea's connection to the World Word, nor was such an opportunity likely to present itself.

"I'm invincible anyway. I want to be happy."

Elea felt the warmth Kia's body and a slight tremble through her fingers.

Elea wanted happiness. That's what she was always hoping for.

"…Yes. That's a good point."

Elea smiled. As she ran her hand over Kia's blond hair, her tender turquoise eyes brimmed with tears.

"I ended up being the one taught something today. You're my best student, Kia."

Guided again by the detecting piece of cloth, they set out running through the middle of the disaster. Even as the atrocities of war unfolded both in the air and on the ground, none of the damage reached the two of them, just as Kia's words commanded.

Once the war had started, the situation would quickly be settled through an unimaginable dimension of terror and fear. Whether in victory or defeat. Ironically, it also served to prove the righteousness of rule via the overwhelming individual strength to which Taren the Punished ascribed.

"Hey, Elea! We'll still be able to go back, right…? Back to when everything was peaceful?"

"Well…"

"For the city Lana loved so much to end up like this, and, well…Lana's suffered so much, too! It's awful, isn't it?!"

“Yes…quite terrible.”

Kia’s and Elea’s backgrounds were worlds apart from each other. Kia didn’t understand a thing. The Eta Sylvan Province where she had grown up was one of the few frontiers to escape the atrocities of the True Demon King. She knew nothing about how irrevocable tragedy and terror were in the current age.

“…I hope everyone can return to normal.”

◆

The series of battles that broke out after the New Principality’s bombardment of Mage City was tilting in Aureatia’s favor.

From an onlooker’s perspective, this was the result of two factors—the command of Hidow the Clamp, who had anticipated the fall of Mage City’s military installations and split up his forces ahead of time, and the Mage City soldiers following Harghent the Still into a counteroffensive against the wyvern army’s raid, which normally would have annihilated the city’s defensive forces.

The New Principality had been quickly drawn into a decisive land battle, faster than they could set up their primary strength—the wyvern army’s air-defense network.

However, the greatest elements upsetting the tide of battle were two Shura who far exceeded any of the New Principality’s expectations.

The powerful rogue Alus the Star Runner, forcing his way into the battle and crushing a massive chunk of the wyvern army, together with the flock leader, Regnejee. Additionally, the construct weapon, Nihilo the Vortical Stampede, who single-handedly collapsed the defensive lines on the ground, inviting the enemy military force mustering behind her into the city.

Supposing this were the world of the Beyond, an individual with enough power to overwhelm a nation’s military wouldn’t be allowed to exist.

Even in this world—the place where impermissible deviants drifted as Visitors—during the twenty-five-year dark age of the True Demon King’s existence, there had been threats scattered across various regions lying dormant.

However, this was no longer the case. The Dungeon Golem destroyed Nagan, Vikeon the Smoldering died, and the newest self-proclaimed Demon King had assembled strong warriors of peerless strength together for the New Principality of Lithia.

The age that had been built on the terror of the True Demon King was, through the death of the former monarch, beginning to awaken.

“You know, I really liked that fountain, too.”

Dakai the Magpie lingered on a roof, looking down at the collapsed and smashed plaza fountain.

The smoldering fumes coming from the northwestern part of the city were visible even this close to the central stronghold. The self-propelling

flames, stemming from the magic item Alus the Star Runner had let loose during his melee, continued to spread, abnormal in their disregard for the city's structure, with a section of the conflagration making its way toward the city's military facilities.

Looking at the sky, he saw a group of the patrolling wyvern soldiers cut apart and begin crashing down to earth. Nihilo the Vortical Stampede, continuing her advance toward the central part of the city, shot down the airborne threats without end.

"We've really lost."

He lit his hand-rolled cigarette. The thin puff of smoke was carried on the winds of the New Principality. The taste of ruin.

Despite being proud of his supreme insight, even he hadn't predicted that the intervention of two massive threats would have such an effect on the battle plan. He didn't believe the New Principality was weak. In the face of Alus the Star Runner, average non-wyvern soldiers wouldn't have been able to scratch him. This was even truer for the defensive line attempting to hold back Nihilo the Vortical Stampede, which would have been unable to defeat her even with technology from the Beyond.

The spire he had his sights set on let out a shrieking crack and crumbled at its base. The ground-shaking collapse continued. Even among the vibrations, the barefooted Dakai's stance didn't move a muscle.

…Finally, the enemy appeared.

An enormous black arthropod leg stepped forward out of a gap in the debris, splitting the stone pavement under it. The red eyes, sparking clearly even in the dark of night, nightmarishly flickered.

Dakai tossed the radzio he was operating to his feet and confronted the horrifying monster.

"The unit here's already withdrawn. Just me."

"Is that so? How kind of you to inform me, thank you."

The dead tarantula replied with the voice of a young girl.

"You should've done the same."

"What're you talking about…? That'd be such a waste."

He'd ordered the soldiers to fall back because he didn't want them getting in his way.

His sword blade was shaped similar to a bistoury—the Magicked Blade of Razhucort. Taking initiative against any and all attacks, it was a sword with absolute agility. It was a vessel that defied the logic of the Beyond and those exiled here. Prior to coming to this world, no one existed who had survived a fight with Dakai the Magpie.

"—In a world this fun, everything's mine for the taking."

"*Tee-hee…* Oh? Then be sure to get a good look before you die."

A percussive blast echoed as the sound barrier was broken. Dakai instantly swung the Magicked Blade and evaded the deadly salvo of string. The incredible tensile strength forcibly repelled his arm.

At that moment, the colossus's charge halted. The organic tank Helneten had crushed the entire house Dakai had been standing next to under its overwhelming speed and weight.

The young girl chuckled amid the echoes of the destruction.

"Everything ends up smashed to tiny pieces."

Dakai had evaded the rush with the slightest motion and landed back on the ground. He observed his enemy.

…A construct, huh. Same as the ones I saw back in Nagan. That means this tarantula sucker's gotta have a core keeping it alive just like those golems did.

The nefarious red light left a trail in the dark, getting a fix on Dakai's position. The tarantula wasn't solely reliant on its strength and speed. Its sense of perception was extremely acute, which had allowed it to lock and fire accurate long-range attacks at wyverns overhead.

The eight legs moved. Keeping his offhand in his pocket, Dakai observed its movements. One leg would begin its windup motion, and another would follow it. Then the next. Its chest joints moved. Head. Neck. Stomach. The deviant's perception was able to grasp the flow of muscles and nerves even through the monster's thick armor.

So it's inside, huh?

He concluded the tarantula had a pilot. If there was a single reason why the minia supremacist nation of Aureatia had been able to throw an embodiment of carnage like this on the front lines, it was because there existed a pilot *who could control* its fighting power.

A vibrating tremor rang through the air. Dakai dodged with a half step. The stone wall behind him was sliced by the cutting thread and began sliding diagonally to the ground. He moved the fingers on his swordless left hand.

I gotta kill the person inside this thing. Now, how to do that?

The next charge pressed him back. He averted his upper body downward, as if falling. Diving underneath the tarantula's body to dodge the charge, he simultaneously slashed with his enchanted saber in between its eight legs, utilizing the speed of his opponent's attack.

"*…Ha-ha-ha.* C'mon now."

He could tell from his saber's feedback. He hadn't notched a single scratch. The slash from the Magicked Blade of Razhucort, its speed making it always outpace its opponents, had simply slid right off the armored surface.

"Isn't that a little *too* hard?"

"You're quite skilled, aren't you, Mr. Swordsman?"

His enchanted saber had targeted the joint connecting the leg to the body.

"But you can't win against me."

"…Swordsman? Swordsman, huh. Hmmmm…"

There was another attack Dakai had attempted during the previous exchange. By tangling the ultra-hard tarantula string from the last attack into a ringlike shape, he'd tried to use Nihilo's own charging force to twist her neck and sever it. The movements in his left hand had been to draw the threads for the attack.

From what he could see, this, too, had proven ineffective. Despite focusing the brunt of his attack at one point on the head bearing those five glowing red eyes, only a single blemish was noticeable.

…Swordsman, huh…

The tarantula Nihilo piloted had had half its head sliced off.

Dakai the Magpie didn't have the means to destroy his enemy's armor with any of the attacks available to him, but if that was the case, who had managed that slash wound?

"Oh, over there… See that fountain?"

Dakai chattered idly as he moved into a position facing the organic tank head on.

"I was pretty fond of it actually. I like buildings and scenery, see. 'Cause you can't steal them."

Another long-range string attack grazed him.

"Ha-ha-ha."

Dakai laughed. He was observing his enemy's status.

Nihilo the Vortical Stampede's armor was wet. Her last charge had destroyed the fountain's water channel.

Initial preparations for another forward charge. He had seen them a number of times at that point, but there was a subtle difference to the motion.

…Planning to use her strings, then.

Strings stretched ahead of her as she struck. All the threads she had fired were a part of her web. Even if he dodged the initial attack, the recoil from her threads would send target his back. The tarantula's string, durable enough to repel the giant's weight, also served to reinforce its trampling power.

"Now…time to die."

Just before the tank's charge—Dakai made a hand signal behind his back.

"For whom, now?"

Suddenly, a beaming light from above caught Nihilo, sending the stone pavement into a boil. Her black arthropod legs sunk into the melting earth. While enduring the fierce heat, she tried crawling up with her front legs, but without footing, they, too, sank. The air sizzled in the heat, and the whites and blacks mixed into a gray haze.

The radzio communications Dakai had been sending right before the start of their fight were to prepare the salvo.

It was the strongest piece of firepower in the New Principality's arsenal. A magic item used to bombard cities from long range. The Cold Star.

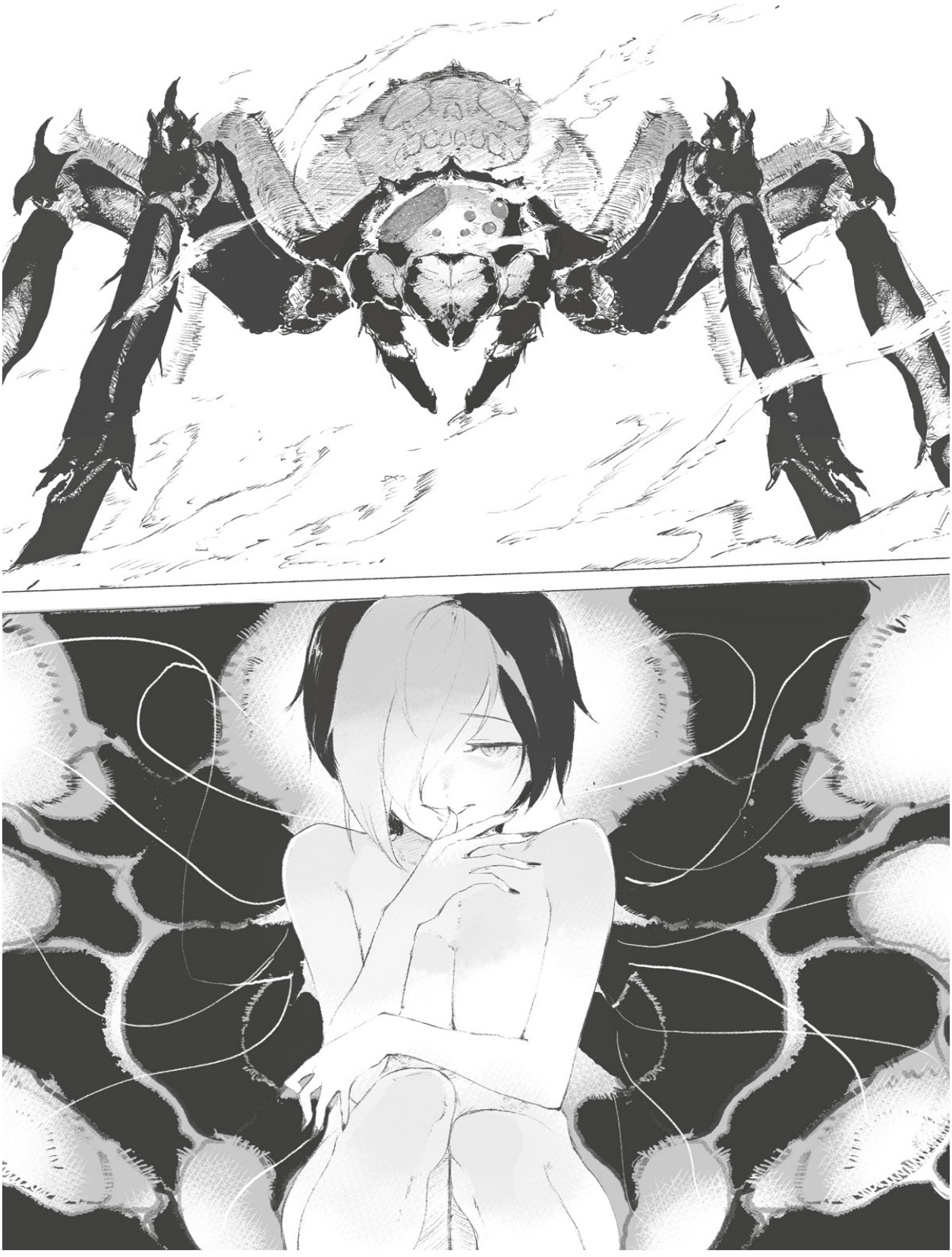
“……Hrgnk.”

The all-destroying beam of light, launched from a spire dedicated to magic item artillery, continued to shine mercilessly on the New Principality’s enemy. Even before the first blast had finished, the young girl’s cries of pain ceased.

“Tee-hee. Hee…hee-hee-hee.”

Because they had given way to laughter.

The cold stone pavement where her legs were sunk split open. With her monstrous physical strength, she extracted her body.



Immediately after, she fired threads into the sky, annihilating the artillery spire that had tried to kill her.

"Did you think that would be enough…"

Her armor was made from deep celestial charsteel, a supernatural magic gem. It was a material that average amounts of heat and force couldn't scratch. Not swords, arrows, or bombardments could break it.

Even the transcendental Cold Star was no exception.

"…to kill me?"

The hard truth that the Cold Star was completely ineffective wasn't what sent Dakai the Magpie into a true crisis.

Immediately before the bombardment, he had lured Nihilo to spray her with water from the fountain. Once she was hit with the beam of light, the air inside should have swelled up with the heat and formed bubbles in the cracks of the invincible armor shell.

However, even with Dakai's peerless eyesight, he observed no such reaction.

Completely sealed. There aren't even air vents? How's the person inside still alive?

The lack of any gaps in the armor meant that the defect Dakai had intuited—an effective method to injury the pilot—*didn't actually exist*.

I can't try to suffocate her. Flooding is useless. My enchanted saber has no effect. Even if she's buried, she can pull herself free. Tricks to twist her threads, aiming for her joints, a direct attack from the Cold Star—none of it does anything.

He could only accept that destroying the tarantula was impossible.

He was sure this construct far outstripped the Dungeon Golem he'd witnessed in Nagan. This world's ultimate weapon even surpassed the wildest imagination of a deviant from the Beyond.

"Seriously… *Ha-ha.* How the hell did someone even cut this thing…?"

"You're in my way."

With both arms at his sides, Dakai looked at the tarantula drawing near him. The cross section carved off its head looked like a smooth mirror's surface. The magic-gem armor appeared to permeate into the flesh within, given how well-preserved the shape was despite its nerves and inner flesh being burned raw.

It raised its chela. Faster than the average person could finish a single breath, Dakai's eyes were able to perceive the movement. He watched the glowing red eyes. Observed them. An attack came at him from the left. With a subtle move, he parried and—

"…Hngaaah!"

The overwhelming impact sent Dakai flying. He collided with an iron pole that had survived the fire in the plaza.

His supernatural Visitor martial skills enabled him to deflect most of the damage, barely keeping his left arm from breaking from the impact of her

rush. An average person would have felt the energy travel through their whole body and been scattered to pieces.

"…Okay."

It was fun. Dakai the Magpie enjoyed this world. Before he'd arrived here, no one had been capable of standing up to him in a fight.

"All right. Let's go… Time to give it a shot."

"…You're still alive?"

The young girl's voice was suspicious. If he'd been able to react this way, he should have been able to dodge the strike entirely from the start. It meant he'd wanted to take the hit.

"Why doesn't…*koff*, anyone ever believe me?"

Dakai spun his enchanted saber in his hand. His opponent was already right before his eyes.

"I'm a bandit, you know…? I'm not actually a swordsman or a doctor, see?"

"I see. I think we'd get along, then."

Nihilo readied her next attack. She knew that Dakai's current stance meant he was prepared to evade her string. Her kicks to send him flying would be similarly ineffective. She needed to stomp him into the ground or pinch him between her two chela and crush him.

"I want to be friends with minia, too, but no one will believe me."

"*Ha-ha-ha.* Really now. First time we've been able to have a chat. I'm quite the talker, see."

She approached. Before Dakai had finished speaking, the colossus's legs were a blur. It was an instantaneous offensive, too fast to be dodged in time, taking her opponent's reaction speed into consideration.

The attack cut through the air. Dakai moved, with speed faster than his physical body could manage.

"See, like this…"

…The threads! Nihilo realized. He had utilized the threads she had been stretching around the battlefield during their fight. He used their elastic recoil to slip right into Nihilo's bosom.

"I steal weapons…"

The tarantula's injured face—the deviant bandit pulled a sword out of the monster's sole laceration.

"I *pick locks*, too."

This was not the Magicked Blade of Razhucort. It wasn't a long sword, either. In fact, it was Dakai's first time using it at all.

With her mount unexpectedly stabbed, Nihilo backed off and tried to regroup. Even if her head was attacked, it would have no impact whatsoever on the undead's functions. It could attack, defend, and execute maneuvers.

"……What…?"

The young girl was flustered by what she was sensing.

"……What did you do?"

She felt the night air on her bare skin. The sensation was being sent to her through her mount, Helneten, but *she was feeling her own skin*.

“Well now, just as I predicted—quite the pretty face.”

She could still control the tank, just as before. Its mobility hadn’t been impacted at all. However.

Helneten’s cockpit was open, and Nihilo’s body packed inside was exposed.

“I thought about it.”

“……!”

The deviant bandit’s figure was right before her eyes. Nihilo—her actual form—was face-to-face against an enemy who had climbed inside her cockpit.

“If this tank’s made from organic material, then it uses its nerves to move. So if someone’s piloting it, then it must be relaying commands via the nerves spreading through its muscles… And I thought, well, if that’s the case, then I destroy those nerves, right?”

In his left hand, Dakai the Magpie held a nondescript short sword.

“With nerve-rendering mandrake poison.”

It was a dagger from Higuare the Pelagic.

When they first met and he’d seen Higuare slice up the hawthorn berry, Dakai had already given one of the numerous daggers concealed within Higuare’s body a once-over—*in his own hands*. Right before everyone’s eyes, with such dexterity that no one even noticed, he had already stolen one of the deadly poisoned blades.

The observational power of an otherworldly deviant, able to perceive even the flow of another’s nerves. He had confirmed through his observations that no matter which part of the brain the nerve-tracing poison infiltrated and paralyzed, he would be able to *unlock* the opening and closing functions. He had purposefully taken a direct hit so he could observe from point-blank range.

The small wound that Soujirou the Willow-Sword had carved into her was, to Dakai the Magpie, a keyhole.

Comprehending her own demise, the undead Nihilo laughed.

“Tee-hee…hee… You do love to chat, don’t you?”

“I tell a good story, don’t I?”

“…Perhaps you’re right.”

Nihilo’s back tendrils flashed, their metallic terminals aiming for Dakai’s neck.

Just a few beats faster than her attack, the Magicked Blade and its absolute speed sliced the girl’s head from her neck.

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“H-Higuare…was killed.”

As she scrambled up one of the charred towers, Lana the Moon Tempest moaned in terror. He was supposed to be one of the strongest of all, who the New Principality had scoured the ends of the wide world to finally find. Yet an even greater power had handled Higuare the Pelagic like a baby, snuffing him out with what seemed like no difficulty whatsoever.

From Lana's perspective, it was clear that the World Word's power had brought instant death to the mandrake.

"Ha, ha-ha…"

She looked up at the sky. The army Regnejee had boasted as unbeatable had been driven back by a single wyvern and was on the verge of total defeat. All at the hands of a champion and deviant from the wyvern race, Alus the Star Runner.

The Lithia troops Taren had trained up herself were dead, too. The inside of the tower was nothing but miserable corpses, unable to speak of their ultimate fate.

The men of the New Principality were Lana's—and Aureatia's—enemy. She had kept her dangerous infiltration duties going in order to defeat them, believing they needed to someday be destroyed, and bring back peace. Nevertheless—

"How did it happen so easily…?"

They were enemies. However, Lana had seen up close just how powerful and fearsome Lithia's military might was. Lithia's power and their will, aiming to be the last self-proclaimed Demon King, shouldn't have been so easily trampled underfoot.

The foul stench of burned flesh and death drifted in the air. She couldn't tell if it was because of the conflagration itself or the flames of war, but sweat poured endlessly down her tiny body—and she herself couldn't even be sure if it was actually blood or a mixture of the two.

"Haaa… Ha-ha."

After crawling up the final stair, Lana grabbed hold of what she had been after. The Cold Star. The dead bombardier continued holding it tightly, despite his body having been sliced in two, but she forcefully tore it away from the clutch of fingers strengthened by rigor mortis. The magic item that spent many long years gathering sunlight in the Great Nagan Labyrinth. It was filled with enough power for one final shot. If Lana could use this—

"…Lana, what are you doing?"

A voice from behind reprimanded her. It was Elea the Red Tag.

She was responsible for bringing the wielder of almighty Word Arts, the World Word, here to Lithia.

"Elea… It's okay. I'll do it."

Lana's voice trembled as she spoke.

It had to be this way.

The current scene before her was exactly what Taren had feared. It was the reason she'd decided to make the world her enemy.

The True Demon King was defeated, but the world was still filled with beings that shouldn't and couldn't continue to exist.

"I'll kill them all. This… It's just…it's so horrible. Monsters, all of them. I'll use the Cold Star to blow them all away and the whole city with them! Someone…s-someone has to do it, or it'll never end!"

"Lana…!"

Without waiting for Elea's next words, Lana pulled the trigger on the magic tool. The crystal lens fired a bright light, like the midday sun. It radiated out directly below to blow apart the central fortress, the city streets, and Lana herself altogether.

The light, and the destruction, rushed forward.

And then—

"Stop."

—it ceased.

The light from the Cold Star hung suspended in midair, gathered into a sphere.

Unable to advance any farther, the doom-bringing light stalled in the air. It was an impossible sight to bear witness to, one that twisted and bent the fabric of the world's reality.

"Scatter."

With a single word from the young girl, the city-leveling orb burst open, vanishing into thin air without destroying anything.

"No…n-no…"

Lana collapsed in despair.

How were people supposed to stand against power *mighty enough to stop light itself*?

Was there anyone in the land…able to kill the World Word, the embodiment of the world itself?

"Calm down, Lana. You're probably…just so scared you can't think straight. The Lana I know isn't like this at all… Right?" the incomprehensible entity asked, acting as though she were a normal young girl.

Her face had the appearance of worry.

Even though despite her elf-child nature, her existence, her unlimited omnipotent power, was a sinister divinity given form.

"It's all because there are atrocities like this…"

She looked down on the burning town visible from the tower.

The myriad calamities and tragedies scattered before her showed a merciless world, utterly unimaginable to the still-fourteen-year-old Kia.

"…Hey, Elea. You said my power was a power to bring happiness to people, right?"

"Kia!"

Lana saw Elea try to stop Kia.

As though she knew what the young girl was planning to do.

"You can't, Kia! You shouldn't show your—"

“Go out.”

It happened exactly as she commanded.

The inferno spreading through Lithia, the fires of war, was extinguished all at once, without so much as a breeze.

The quiet and darkness of night returned like the end of a bad dream.

This fearsome Shura, who surpassed all minia knowledge, could both cause terrible calamities and make them disappear as if they’d never happened.

“…I put out the fire, Lana. There’s nothing to be scared of anymore. Um, actually…the truth is…I can do pretty much anything… Sorry for keeping it a secret. If only I could’ve saved your city sooner…”

“Wh-what the hell…? What the hell is with you people?!”

“Lana…!”

“Lana, let’s go home.”

Elea embraced the frozen-stiff Lana in her arms.

The gentle and cozy body warmth traveled through her. The beating throb of a living person.

“…Elea. You…,” Lana spoke, smiling through her tears. Her former intelligence agent colleague was now one of the Twenty-Nine Officials of Aureatia.

Elea had climbed to that position because she didn’t hesitate to stamp out her enemies to seize power.

Thus, she knew why Elea had come up close to her.

“…want to kill me, don’t you?”

“……”

“I get it, though. You can’t, can you?”

Her hoarse whisper sounded entirely like blackmail, but Lana didn’t mind.

With her voice directly in Elea’s ear, too low for the World Word to hear, Lana spit out her final, spiteful words.

“If you truly planned on killing me as soon as possible, you had plenty of chances to do so. Y-you…can’t, though. You can’t kill me in front of Kia, can you?”

Considering Elea the Red Tag’s callousness, Lana’s accusation was an absurd joke. A laughable jest, even in this nightmarish, rock-bottom situation.

“Only in front of Kia…no matter how monstrous that girl may be, you want to remain her beautiful and kind teacher, don’t you?! *Professor* Elea!”

“…Lana,” Elea replied with a whisper. She looked at Kia, on the verge of tears out of bleakness and bewilderment.

Far too many things had happened. But with this, she would end it all.

She had come to kill Lana the Moon Tempest.

“A teacher…would never do something like that, would she?”

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The door opened again not long after the tumult of the conflagration in the streets had reached Yuno's ears. The location of her cell, far from the northwestern area where the fire had kicked up, had saved her life.

"Get out, Yuno the Distant Talon."

"…Dakai."

"What's wrong? I came back to save you, *just like I said I would*."

Yuno glared at the reappearance of her homeland's ruination. Dakai the Magpie was abnormally calm given the extreme circumstances, the city streets in flames, and the situation descending into chaos.

"…You're telling me this *now*?! Isn't that army of yours fighting right this second?! And you still have spare time to free someone like me?!"

"It's not my army," Dakai replied coolly.

"Scream and cry all you want; the results are the same. I'm simply here keeping a promise. Plus, Higuare roped you into this, and then there's the Nagan thing, too, huh. That and, hey, I'm a scoundrel, sure, but I never lie."

"Sh-shut up…! So what, being strong means you don't give a damn if your city gets destroyed?! It's not sad?! Painful?! You won't fight to the death?!"

—While I've felt like I've been in the depths of hell dealing with just one person's death, Yuno thought.

A nation in ruins. Citizens burned alive and all bonds lost forever. If Dakai wasn't tormented by the same thing happening to him, then Yuno's vengeance for Nagan's destruction would be eternally unattainable.

"…Got a point there. By now, I don't really feel a thing. I mean, I did have a thing for Taren, but you know. Long as I'm alive, I'll meet other people, yeah?"

Yuno thought of the circumstances surrounding the Visitors—people severed from their own world, the Beyond.

Did both Soujirou and Dakai not feel a thing because of how strong they were? They were mutated deviants born among other minia, but even among their own people, they had always been strong. Isolated.

Just as Dakai was going to live on now, even if a Visitor's countries and cities were destroyed, they would always survive. Was that really the special privilege of the strong that Yuno thought it was? Was *growing accustomed* to ruin and death truly a comfort to them?

Dakai turned and began to depart. Yuno's vengeance was on the cusp of ending unfulfilled.

"Wait, Dakai the Magpie!"

"What? You still have something to say to me?"

"You said if I was going to get vengeance, to *kill you right now*, yes?"

She extended both arms toward him.

She could utilize Force Arts to send the arrowheads hidden up her sleeves flying.

More so than other girls her age, she knew some botany.

She recalled the star that she and Lucelles had discovered together.

Because she was the last surviving scholar of Nagan Labyrinth City, destroyed by a colossal injustice.

They were the only things Yuno the Distant Talon happened to have at her disposal.

Face-to-face with an extreme power far beyond her reach, she was all alone.

“Fight me.”

CHAPTER 21 Time of the Setting Sun

"…Curte. Hurry up and flee, fool."

Within one of Lithia's spires, Regnejee was cowering as the city fell. As his breathing grew fainter and fainter, he was still giving orders and gathering the final reports from his wyvern troops. While Curte fretted over the severe burns on her best friend's body, Regnejee still rejected her advances to nestle up against him.

"Regnejee. Wh-why…? Is this your blood? How could you be beaten? I can't believe it…"

"Lithia is finished. I owe Taren. The swarm, too… *Kraw, kraaaw.* I always protected them. Increased our size, controlled them, guided them. The whole lot of scum. Serves 'em right."

Regnejee gave a pained laugh. Within the wyvern flock, he had been nothing more than a small, average individual, easily lost among the group.

"But with this, it's all gone to waste. Too bad. But…in the very, very end, I still won, Curte."

"……"

"My prized treasure's… *Krah-ha-ha.*"

Despite his incessant abuse and continued rejection of her touch, Regnejee had always been by the blind girl's side. What he truly longed for wasn't a country. It wasn't even the peace and order of the swarm.

He'd always refused to accept it. In truth, he, too, had wanted to abandon the swarm. He wondered how great it would have been to live as a solitary wyvern with Curte. So long as he could listen to her song in peace and tranquility, that would have been enough for Regnejee.

"…Run away. Before the Aureatia Army gets here… As long as you live… that's enough for me…"

Alus had let Regnejee go. He had assumed Regnejee was an inconsequential dying soldier. That was fine with Regnejee. He was fine being a wretched loser, a fool, who had made the wrong choice that fateful day.

"I'll win in the end… You'll see…Alus the Star Runner."

"…Regnejee."

Curte smiled with loneliness. She could remember the days she spent with the wyvern, even without her diary nearby. She knew there was always someone with bloodstained wings aiding her, a young girl without the strength to live on her own.

She turned to the dying Regnejee and tried to find the words with which to part from him.

Suddenly, the door opened. Standing there was a soldier holding a musket, looking weary and worn out. He was exhausted and looked very unbecoming for a general.

“……D-don’t move…!”

The man barging into the wyvern commander’s room was named Harghent the Still.

Amid the chaotic battle, with the other Mage City soldiers falling one after another, he alone, with his long record of wyvern subjugation, had identified the wyvern commander’s position and had been able to plunge so far ahead.

Slipping through tumultuous battles in enemy territory, he believed he had arrived at the city’s central hub of power.

However, seeing the conditions within the room threw him into confusion, sending his desperate efforts and resolve up in a puff of smoke.

He wasn’t in a wyvern’s nest at all. The room was a residence for a young girl.

“N-no… Impossible…”

“……Who’s there?”

The girl, Curte of the Fair Skies, stared at the Sixth General with her unseeing eyes. On the other side of her, still succumbing to his lethal burns, Regnejee glared at his enemy, ever serving as the girl’s attendant.

“I-I’m…the Sixth General, a member of the Twenty-Nine Officials of Aureatia. H-Harghent the Still. On the request of Mage City, I’ve come here…to defeat our foreign enemy…!”

“…I see. Aureatia… It really is the end, then.”

Curte unexpectedly stood up. She was a blind girl without any combat ability, but before her figure, her overly long, faintly colored hair, Harghent found himself shrinking back.

He wanted to believe this young girl had been taken captive by the wyverns.

But he knew. Even if no one else believed him, Wing Clipper Harghent knew.

Even if their relationship was that of predator and prey, even if they would have been eternal enemies.

“Stop.”

It was possible for bonds to form between wyverns and humans.

“Stop. You can’t do this. It’s not good. That’s a fearsome beast who’s slaughtered civilians. As a minia, it’s my d-duty…to kill him.”

“Regnejee’s… He’s my friend. A precious friend who’s saved me more than any minia ever has.”

“You, girl… You’re still so young! Th-there’s…there’s no need for you to shoulder such guilt! Get away from him. Please. People are dying. I’ve had enough. I—I don’t…I don’t actually want to kill anyone, either. So please…”

“…I knew. I only pretended like I didn’t, but from the very beginning…I knew what I was doing… What Regnejee was doing—”

“Stop…!”

Harghent was unable to move as he kept his barrel trained on the damnable wyvern. He only needed to slightly pull the trigger, yet his finger was heavy, as if frozen solid.

“You were always…my angel, Regnejee.”

“He’s the enemy of all minia! He’s a wyvern!”

“Don’t say it, scum! Incompetent scum! Boneheaded fool! Say any more to Curte and—”

Leaping up, Regnejee’s talons closed in on Harghent’s head—

With a loud bang, the wyvern’s throat was shot clean through.

The bullet pierced a straight line through Curte’s chest, too. If she hadn’t risen, she most likely would have avoided the bullet’s path.

The shot had come from the open window.

“Don’t make fun of…,” the shooter mumbled, far off in the distance. There was no one to hear the words.

“…my friend.”

It was the wyvern champion who had once spared Regnejee’s life.

Why did Alus the Star Runner come to Lithia? Why did he first appear over Mage City, where Harghent was fighting? The rogue who was greedy above all else.

Harghent knew the reason. He knew why Alus the Star Runner had returned to Vikeon the Smoldering’s ravine, to kill the dragon after already defeating him and stealing all his treasure.

“Of course I’m going to try and save my friend.”

Faced with the sea of blood before him, Harghent fell to his knees in shock.

“Ah… Aaaaaargggh…!”

The lead wyvern he was supposed to hunt down and the young girl he was supposed to protect were now piled on the floor as if dumped in a ditch. Their blood intermingled, and with forlorn vigor, the dark crimson spread across the floor.

The scene was Harghent’s—the incompetent Sixth General’s—conclusion to the war.

“*Aaargh*, Alus… Alus…!”

Rage.

Despair.

Sorrow.

Regret.

Self-condemnation.

The unbearable emotions all blended together, and Harghent fell to the ground and screamed—

“Alusssss! Damn youuuuu!”

◆

A number of memories were passing through her visionless eyes, like a slideshow. A number of her personal events, starting from that day, the day the True Demon King stole everything from her.

The general named Harghent had left to find help, but given the severity of Curte's wounds, she knew the general didn't think she would be able to hold out for aid to arrive.

She could feel her own weakening heartbeat.

Crawling across the floor with her fingers, she touched Regnejee for the first time.

"Oh…Regnejee…"

Tears flowed from her blind eyes. Curte had realized the truth. But the wyvern never let her touch him, to prevent her from discovering it, to keep her dream alive.

"You really were a wyvern after all…"

She heard the door open quietly. She was unable to see who entered, but she could tell it wasn't Harghent. The long-gaited footsteps came to a stop beside Curte.

With her failing breath, she called out.

"…Who's there…?"

A deep voice responded gently.

"If I said an angel, would you believe me? We've come to see you off, little girl."

The man had stooped down and was rubbing Curte's back. His hand was big and warm.

An angel had come. The song she'd heard that day must've been an angel's song after all.

"I see… Thank you… Angel… Th-the truth is…there's something…I've always hoped for…"

"I understand. Everyone has the right to be saved. You can ask me for anything."

"It's my mother…"

Until her final moments, Curte continued singing her song. The song she sang for Regnejee.

The angel of death's blade quietly ended her pain.

◆

Many events were already over. At the very least, they were for Taren the Punished.

She had lost the feeling in her right hand, but she still gripped her sword tight. She wondered how many of the Aureatia and Mage City soldiers who had broken through the defensive line she had killed on her own. It might have been ten or maybe twenty.

On her path forward toward the central fortress, there was a mercenary wrapped in a tattered cloak. A skeleton.

“…A first-rate ending for a self-proclaimed Demon King, Taren.”

“Hmph, there you are, Shalk… You’ve put in a lot of work, too, I bet.”

“Don’t mention it. I never really did much to begin with.”

“I don’t know. As far as I’m concerned, you’ve done plenty.”

Shalk’s white spear, like her own sword, was dyed red with blood. She hadn’t been given any information about what he had done after using up all his might to head off the abomination named Soujirou. In the end, he was the only one to return to Taren’s side.

“Regret fighting a losing battle?”

“…Never. Entering battle means you need to accept defeat and loss, too… Actually, no—”

Leaning up against a wall, Taren took a ragged breath. A self-deprecating smile spread over her face. She had the feeling such smiles had become more frequent since she’d become the lord of Lithia.

“That’s a lie. The truth is…the soldiers who idolized me, the citizens, Curte…I’m sad I couldn’t make them happy. Involving them all in my yet-unrealized ideals and seeing them rewarded with death, unable to witness anything concrete, is what’s most regrettable of all.”

“…I see.”

“Hmph. I lacked the capacity as ruler to create peace, I suppose… The only world I ever lived in was on the battlefield…”

“Don’t let it bother you. I’m in a similar position. Even after dying, this is how I ended up.”

“Shalk the Sound Slicer. You wanted information about the Final Land… where the True Demon King perished, right?”

“……”

“Don’t you think it’s strange? No one knows anything about the True Demon King. Both you and myself… There’s nothing we can put into words, and yet, everyone knows just how terrifying the monster was. But I know… there’ll come a time when we need to discover for ourselves…”

Propping herself up with her sword, Taren took out a piece of paper from her breast pocket with her free hand and passed it to Shalk.

“I can’t read.”

“Then have someone read it for you. We searched for the Final Land a number of times, but our survey team…they were completely blocked off. There’s some form-unknown monster in that place after all. Totally uncharted territory… However, there was one place our survey team barely managed to reach.”

“……”

“The Hero’s corpse and the Demon King’s corpse have yet to be found.”

“…Learning that is plenty. Had I worked harder, I probably could’ve helped save you.”

“I can’t give you any more reward than this. Now, go wherever you like. You’ll earn no profit if it is discovered that you served a general like myself.”

Taren knew someone would appear soon to put an end to her. She didn't plan on giving up without a fight, but she didn't want to embroil a soldier of Shalk the Sound Slicer's caliber in a losing battle.

"…Capacity to be king, huh? I think you would've made a pretty good one, myself."

"Hmph. Not quite the word."

Taren grinned.

"You mean *Demon King*."

Shalk the Sound Slicer departed without another look back. Taren knew she wouldn't see him again.

◆

"Waaaah!"

How many times was it now? Having mustered the courage to face death, Yuno's fist meaninglessly swiped through the air. She was working from zero knowledge of hand-to-hand combat to begin with.

"…Listen."

Dakai appeared truly, from the bottom of his heart, baffled as to why Yuno was going so far.

"You really gotta escape, or things are gonna get bad fast."

"Shut…up! *Haah, haah, haah*, I haven't…landed a single…"

"Ah, right…"

There was a relatively weak smacking sound—the sound of Yuno's fist hitting Dakai's cheek. With her strength, she couldn't even make his neck shake. Dakai shrugged.

"There you go, one punch. We done? It's really rare for me to play along with someone for this long—you know that?"

"A-auuuggghhh…!"

Yuno crouched down and cried. Her hatred and grief were completely worthless, holding no meaning to anyone besides herself. It had been that way in Nagan and now here in Lithia, too.

"I don't think we'll ever see each other again, Yuno."

Dakai began to depart, indeed appearing completely unconcerned with Yuno's feelings. A powerful deviant, out of reach of the average person. Yuno couldn't follow his fleeing footsteps, much less take the man's life.

"…Wait…"

The hand she held out to pull him back didn't reach Dakai, but nevertheless, his feet stopped.

Outside of the prison, in the middle of his path, someone was lingering like an evil spirit.

CHUN

* * *

"—Yo."

Yuno wasn't able to follow Dakai or kill him. All the same, there was one other method she had to deliver his comeuppance.

"Perfect. You look like you'll be a fun fight."

With his snakelike face, the blade flashed an asymmetrical smile.

"…From the very start, I never really thought…"

She had figured there was a chance he'd survived his fight on the plain. She thought there might be a chance he would make it in time. She believed that given the extreme gap in their abilities, there was a chance Dakai wouldn't kill Yuno and humor her challenge to fight him.

"…that *I* could ever win."

Just a chance.

Her gamble had extremely low odds, without any sliver of certainty, but with Yuno, all alone in the world, it was worth betting everything on that chance.

"Ah… Those arrows in your sleeves."

Dakai looked toward the grated window. In the detention cells, only ever used to house unruly drunks, the gaps in the grate were quite large.

"I thought it was strange how you had less of them."

Left alone in the holding area, Yuno had sent her arrowheads flying through the window with Force Arts. As far as she could get them, trying to carve marks in a variety of places.

The only thing she could use were these arrowheads she'd sharpened herself. Having traveled with her, Soujirou the Willow-Sword would have recognized them if they were stuck somewhere. He would have been able to follow the straight line of engraved guideposts from the arrows back to the source.

—The girl's second name was Yuno the Distant Talon.

"*Ha, ha-ha-ha…!* That's hilarious…! Amazing! I don't believe it…! I got fooled by a girl like this?! You never know what life's gonna throw at you next, I tell you…"

Dakai clapped his hands and laughed. Not a courtesy laugh but a true belly laugh.

He then turned to face Soujirou.

"…Ah, the Visitor. I heard about you. You're the swordsman who sliced that tarantula, right? You must have quite the sword, huh?"

Looking at the shape of Soujirou's blade, Dakai could tell it was the one that had carved the scar into Nihilo the Vortical Stampede.

If there truly existed a man in this world capable of shredding that armor—allowing not even a single attack through, defensively invincible, unaffected even by the Cold Star—it could be no one other than the man standing before him.

"You don't seem like a swordsman yourself."

“Fantastic. You’re the first person to say that to me at first glance.”

Dakai smiled with joy, as if trying to show his brimming excitement to discover which of the otherworldly deviant Visitors was stronger.

“You didn’t go assassinate Taren? That was your job here, wasn’t it?”

“Doesn’t matter. I just came to kill. Things I ain’t ever killed with my sword before, stuff that’s fun to kill…stuff that’s only here in this world. Instead of going to find this Taren person…going along with Yuno meant *I wouldn’t know what would end up happenin’*. So I came.”

“…Soujirou.”

Yuno gripped the sleeves of her own clothes.

Though she needed to kill the man eventually, a despised object of her vengeance and one of the detestable and indifferent powerful, at the very least, to Yuno, Soujirou and Dakai were different. The Willow-Sword was the man who had, with a single blade, put an end to that hellscape, the extreme peak of her suffering.

“That enough of the talking? Let’s get going.”

“Don’t be so hasty. Either way, one of us here’s going to die, right? Why don’t we reminisce about the Beyond, eh, Soujirou?”

“No memories worth remembering. The food sucked, people came at me every day trying to kill me, I only ever got to cut down weaklings, and before I realized it, I ended up here.”

“That’s fair; I’m the same way. Even with all these people dead, I don’t give it a second thought. I’ve never felt like I wanted to go back to the Beyond or bummed I wound up here… I guess all Visitors are deviants like that. Too strong, so you’re always alone.”

“Almost like bein’ too strong is a *bad* thing or something.”

“*Ha-ha-ha.* There’s actually a bunch of people who think just that.”

Soujirou the Willow-Sword. Dakai the Magpie. Yuno wondered in the world of the Beyond, a world without Word Arts, just how terrible a presence the two men had been. Fighting, fighting, and fighting some more, until at the end, when there was no one left to fight—they’d arrived in this world of Shura.

“Solitude is freedom. See, you know, that’s why right now, I love who I am. If there was ever a reason behind getting exiled to this world, I think it was to figure that out…”

“…Kill him,” Yuno suddenly muttered. She herself didn’t even register what she’d said.

Losing everything meant being free. Those were the first words Soujirou had said to her.

Yuno had to convince herself. It didn’t matter if her hatred was misplaced or how illusive the possibility was; she had to carry out her vengeance to save herself.

Yuno understood. She had been the one that day in Nagan who deserved her ire. She had been wrong. She couldn’t let herself go. She needed to torment herself over it.

However, such a sound argument would do nothing to save her.

“Kill him…Soujirou! If I’m free to do whatever I want, then I’m free to *plead with you to kill him*, aren’t I?! Even if it’s pointless… Even if it’s annoying, no one can condemn me for it, can they?!”

If, more than anything else, she was unforgivable, weak, culpable, and deserving of reproach…

Then the only thing she could do was place her faith in someone who was none of those things.

This world had always pleaded like that, too. Pleaded that the age of the True Demon King…would be ended by someone else. Everyone had pleaded for someone stronger than themselves to beat the bad guy.

“Yeah. ’Cept, then I’m free to choose if I’m actually gonna kill him or not.”

“Sheesh, and I was just telling you to flee to safety a few minutes ago… Ah well, you don’t need to worry.”

Dakai smiled coyly, twirling his sword in his hand.

Both of them had the inkling that the war was already over. That there wasn’t a single reason to risk it all in this life-and-death gamble.

“I’ll have plenty of time to play with you, too, once this is over.”

Soujirou readied his sword. Like the fencers of the Beyond, he bent his wrist and pointed his long sword straight toward his opponent, his left hand affixed to the pommel. It was a peculiar stance.

Conversely, Dakai remained motionless. In a close-range fight with another minia, his otherworldly and exceptional observational abilities, as well as the Cold Star embodying the ultimate counterattack, meant he needed no stance of his own.

One step.

Soujirou was the first to make his move.

Dakai’s anomalous observational skills saw everything, down to the particles of dust kicked into the air. The blade’s path was the exact thrust he expected from Soujirou’s stance. He noted each individual movement from Soujirou as if taking a series of photographs. He picked up on the doings of Soujirou’s left hand on the sword’s pommel, artfully concealed under the blind spot created by the long thrusting motion of the sword.

His opponent’s intentions, perceptions, he stole all of it. He then started piecing together a strategy based on his observations.

With his swordless left arm wrapped behind his back, he lay in wait for the deadly hit. Right before. Seconds before. Until those seconds dwindled to milliseconds, to nanoseconds, approaching zero.

Here it comes.

Soujirou’s left hand smacked his pommel. Sent flying from his hand, the sword extended out slightly. Very, very slightly. The Magicked Blade existed outside the realm of *slightly*. Dakai understood this was to trick his own estimation of the distance.

It happened at the same time. Soujirou's right hand crossed over and grabbed Dakai's right arm as he brandished his sword—the enchanted saber of ultimate speed, which struck faster than anything else. However, what if the arm controlling said saber could be locked down at the exact same moment its user reacted?

The movements were simultaneous. Ultimate technique, moving faster than the electric synapses of consciousness in one's head.

"It's mine now."

Soujirou clutched Dakai's right sword arm. Dakai didn't move a muscle. From the beginning, he had been motionless, waiting for Soujirou to act.

Because he was hiding one of Higuare the Pelagic's poisoned daggers underneath his bare foot.

Faster than one could think, he sliced at Soujirou's shins with the blade held between his toes.

But he failed.

Yeah. This guy's pretty good.

The back side of Dakai's foot was pinned by Soujirou's first step forward.

His secondary sword had been sealed away.

"That your big plan, then?"

"Pretty much. However—"

The otherworldly and aberrational bandit's true value lay within his power of foresight. Even when faced with a truly powerful swordsman, he could predict the future. His opponent's intentions, their perception—all of it.

Dakai had purposefully let his hand be grabbed and to occupy his adversary's right arm. Soujirou was now obstructed with his own right arm suppressing his left. His open right flank was utterly defenseless. Dakai wasn't in a position to aim for his side artery, nor was he able to twist his body from his suppressed right arm to break free, but with his strength, he could slice through his opponent's midsection, ribs and all.

With his left hand, he held his third blade.

From the start, Dakai's left arm had been folded behind his back.

A sword pommel settled inside his left hand—the conclusion of Soujirou's sword's flight. The intention behind using his ultimate maximum-speed slash was to send the sword flying without shattering its blade.

From the very first move, Dakai the Magpie had read the flow of all of it.

"I've got a monopoly on taking things."

His third sword. The enemy's own blade.

The bandit's sword had surpassed the Yagyuu and sliced the swordsman's torso.

He felt the feedback of the cut travel through his left arm.

Then he realized.

This thing.

"Yo."

The sliced Soujirou was sneering.

Then, on Dakai's side, a sword gripped in both hands, he realized his defeat.

"This sword's… It's…"

The sword's quality was obvious at first glance. It was an extremely poorly made practice sword from Nagan City.

Dakai didn't understand. If the sword was exactly as it appeared, it should have been *totally impossible* for it to slice through that tarantula's body.

Wielding the sword, Dakai finally understood.

The sword in his hands possessed no phenomenal powers. It couldn't even crack an opponent's ribs. This practice sword, wielded by a man of Soujirou's build, had been able to leave a gash in that tarantula?

He had Dakai's right arm in his grasp. The gap in their strength was widening.

"Remember what I said? Your life is forfeit."

"It was…never an enchanted sword to begin with…!"

This land was home to many magical blades. In this world, with the popularization of bows and firearms, the simple possession of an enchanted sword was enough to create a peerless swordsman. Dakai's own sword techniques were entirely predicated on the capabilities of his Magicked Blade.

You must have quite the sword, huh?

Soujirou had incorporated Dakai's misread into his strategy from the beginning. He had seen through Dakai's stance and learned the man was confident in his absolute initiative. As such, disarming his opponent and countering with his own sword, and the logic and technique behind his swordplay, had been known to Soujirou from the very start.

If that was the case, Dakai couldn't help but wonder how wide the gap between the two Visitors had actually been. How much of the man's technical skills were his powers of observation even able to perceive?

If those who deviated from the laws of the Beyond were cast off to this world, then could anyone say exactly *how deviant* these Visitors were?

As his right arm, enchanted saber and all, was slowly being bent toward him, Dakai's line of thought led him to a single conclusion. The more he tried to see through his opponent's weaknesses or a plan to turn the tables, the further he descended into darkness.

He couldn't even imagine it. How could he win against this man? What could he have done differently?

He couldn't fight back. He grasped the same sword in his hand, yet it was as if the sword itself had chosen Soujirou instead.

"*Ha-ha…* I don't…believe it…"

"You said it yourself."

He wanted someone to fight. He had manifested it himself—a genuine monster.

"You ain't no swordsman after all, huh?"

Slashed by the Magicked Blade still gripped in his own hand, the bandit perished on the jail floor.

◆

“I just met your daughter, Taren.”

Death had come to finish Taren the Punished. It was a man in black vestments who gave off an ominous aura.

“Aureatia’s assassin…is Curte…?”

“I wanted to save her. I was too late.”

“I see.”

The man sat down in a nearby chair and looked at Taren. His eyes appeared even more exhausted and morose than Taren’s, who had expended all her energy continuing her fight.

“…I’ll ask you for your daughter’s sake. Taren the Punished. Why did you do this?”

“I wanted to rule the world in Aureatia’s place—is that not a good enough answer?”

“A country that relied on wyverns and sellswords for its military might was never going to last long. Even a layman like myself could figure that out.”

“I don’t know. Plenty of statesmen throughout history have been driven mad with ambition before.”

“…I’d like to believe that wasn’t the case here,” the man clearly stated to the woman he’d been sent to kill.

“The commander of this operation was the young Hidow the Clamp. In truth…you were in collusion with the higher-ups in Aureatia from the beginning, weren’t you? Part of a plan to round up the monsters that had become threats in this post–Demon King age.”

This was the qualifying round.

Beneath Hidow’s words, possibly, there had been an even greater purpose in mind. A preliminary to test whether, for Aureatia, their plan was even possible.

“Hmph. Supposing that was indeed true, then I definitely couldn’t tell you.”

“Okay, then maybe…it was actually…and I know I’m being overly optimistic here…”

Kuze smiled weakly.

“…it was all for your daughter?”

“No,” the undefeated general replied, averting her eyes. A world for Curte. Outside the New Principality of Lithia’s borders, there was no world where wyverns and minia could live together.

“That’s not it…”

“…Well then.”

Even if this was indeed the case, it was a dream that would be forever out of reach. Taren the Punished had lost.

“One final thing. I’m a paladin, see. So it’s confession time. If you have any last words, I’ll hear them.”

“My last words, huh…?”

Taren closed her eyes. Nothing came to mind.

She wanted to apologize to Curte, but the young girl had already departed from the world.

Despite living on the battlefield up until the very end, facing down death over and over again, she had never thought about what her legacy would be after she died.

She felt she needed to leave behind words that would somehow support her people’s future after she was gone. That or words for the Twenty-Nine Officials of Aureatia…her former comrades, encouraging them to view her defeat as a stepping-stone to lead the world down the correct path.

The general, having obtained much power, felt for the first time, moments before her death, that there were matters she was leaving unfinished.

There had to be something she wanted to say. She opened her mouth.

“I want…a Hero.”

“……”

It sounded like the wish of a child.

“If this world had a power stronger than fear, plain for all to see…a True Hero to guide the hopes of the people…”

The True Demon King was defeated. Yet the True Hero was nowhere to be found. That was why no one had been saved from the fear. What Taren had truly wanted to achieve was not peace through suppression. If there could be some symbol, able to turn back the world to a time before it had become twisted with fear, that was enough for her.

“…Well, this is a bit awkward. I didn’t expect to hear words like that from the mouth of a self-proclaimed Demon King.”

Taren took up her sword. Even knowing it was over, she intended to fight to the end.

Kuze the Passing Disaster decided that sword would be the only thing he didn’t stop with his shield.

“I was always afraid, too, Master Paladin.”

“I see. I’m glad. I’ll grant…your daughter’s parting wish, then.”

The white-winged angel descended on Taren’s neck. She dealt a single blow, but there was no pain.

The angel’s blade was a deeply benevolent one, the type those determined to die on the battlefield never wanted to see.

“She asked me to save her mom.”

◆

The upheaval in the New Principality of Lithia, beginning with the Cold Star's bombardment, was settled before the sun could rise. Most of the once-invincible army, close to 70 percent of the wyvern army in particular, had perished in the maelstrom.

The citizen casualties, excluding those killed in the conflagration, were low, and public information was restricted to say that series of battles was due to Taren and her wyvern army going out of control and the excessive response to their surprise attack by a group of Mage City soldiers.

Aureatia intervened in the name of postwar cleanup to once again bring Lithia into its territory, with the political direction for the city to be decided down the line.

Nevertheless, no one knew how the blaze was abruptly extinguished, nor was there anyone who knew the terrifying and abhorrently strong players who were behind the scenes of the whole affair.

Then the morning came.

A woman wretchedly fled through the town outskirts that had survived the fire. Lana the Moon Tempest. While she had escaped the danger to her life from Elea the Red Tag, that life was all she had left. She had nowhere to return to, not Lithia or Aureatia.

"So this…is the state of things now that the True Demon King's dead…"

The monstrous terror that controlled an age gave birth to uncontrollable power. Like the body's defensive reaction to a horrible pathogen causing damage to one's own cells in the process.

Even with the True Demon King defeated, this menace still festered across the land.

Now there were all-powerful and terrible *individuals*…beyond what anyone could imagine.

"Wh-who could ever take them down…? There's nothing we can do…"

There was no one to be seen on the outskirts she wandered through. Only the scars of tragedy, left behind by the fire.

The omnipotent World Word. Star Runner, annihilating an unbeatable army single-handedly.

The Willow-Sword who sought endless battle. The Passing Disaster who killed all.

So long as *they* remained alive, then one day, the whole world would become a scene exactly like this.

"It's all just… They're all just Demon Kings! When will the terror end?! Dammit…!"

Lana's feet got tripped up, and she fell to the ground.

Coughing violently, she spit out an immense amount of black blood.

"*K-koff…* Argh, dammit…!"

A teacher would never do something like that, would she?

“When?”

It was the telltale sign of a lethal poisoning.

“When did she get me…?!”

It happened when Elea had visited Lana in her cell and pressed her hands to her lips. Caught up in Higuare’s attack, Elea spoke the words under her breath. To make sure Lana the Moon Tempest, with her knowledge of everything, couldn’t return to the headquarters in Aureatia… By that point, it was already too late.

“Life Arts…a slow-release poison…! Elea…!”

Raking at the ground in agony, Lana wished for an answer. Not an answer for why she was about to die. There were many monsters strewn about the land who were impossible to usurp, and even the New Principality Taren built had lost to them.

The True Demon King was finally dead, and yet the future held only destruction.

“What can we do…? Wh-what are we supposed to do…? What can we…?”

The long night was coming to an end. In the city visited by destruction, a new dawn arrived.

Before she could meet this new dawn and before she could see the future of despair, Lana the Moon Tempest died.

CHAPTER 22 Shura

With the coming of the new dawn, carriages departed from Lithia's fresh upheaval.

The fighting and the giant blaze had enveloped a majority of Lithia, but at that moment, the news of Taren the Punished's death and the collapse of the New Principality wasn't widely known among the citizenry.

Nevertheless, a number of the residents chose to depart from the self-proclaimed Demon King's country on these early-morning carriages. Some saw their houses burn and had nowhere to live. Others tried to escape from the atmosphere of uneasiness and fear.

"Elea. Are you there?" Kia weakly muttered in a corner of the crowded carriage. Her bright blond hair was overshadowed by a pale gray.

"I'm right here. What's wrong, Kia?"

"Um, if… Once I'm done studying in Aureatia, and when I go back to Eta…maybe…"

"……"

"…Forget it. It's nothing."

Holding her knees against her, Kia stared up from the gap in her hood at the visible parts of the New Principality.

The smoke and ruins of a past prosperity were vague and indistinct. The end of a minia city was something she was seeing for the first time.

"I could've…I could've saved so many more."

The almighty Kia knew as little about the battle that night as the people sitting around her.

The elven girl had no way of knowing about the strife between Aureatia and the New Principality. As such, she had no idea of how she could've stopped the fighting. Bringing back the lives lost in the fighting was impossible, even with her omnipotent arts.

"I'm invincible; I should be able to do anything… Fires and fighting… People dying, hurting others, that stuff is nothing… No matter how sad or awful someone may be, I definitely and absolutely could've taken them down, and yet—"

"None of it is your fault, Kia."

"I know that!"

Elea understood the girl must be harboring feelings of vexed frustration. In her homeland, ignorant of helplessness, where her omnipotence held total sway over her tiny little world, she hadn't felt a single fragment of such emotions.

I know it, too. There are some things even you can't change.

Elea the Red Tag understood Kia better than anyone.

The World Word is definitely not invincible or absolutely flawless.

The World Word. An ultimate existence, outside the bounds of logic and reason, capable of destroying her enemies with a single word and able to claim ultimate victory for herself.

Nevertheless, Kia the young girl was not a weapon, her power utilized at the unconditional commands of a user, nor did she have a mind unbendable by the schemes and designs of others.

Before Elea brought her to her first match of the competition, Kia couldn't experience any sort of *defeat*. Her actual identity as an innocent young girl couldn't be found out by any other faction.

Her invulnerability in battle made it all the more necessary for someone to protect her outside of combat.

Having survived in the world of espionage and betrayal, Elea the Red Tag was more capable of filling that role than anyone else.

Kia and I can win. No matter how difficult or how dirty my hands get…I will absolutely make sure the World Word always emerges victorious.

That battle would continue until all was repaid. Her birth, her espionage, her betrayal—everything.

The young girl suddenly mumbled anxiously.

"Hey, Elea. You're not…mad about Lana, are you?"

"Not at all. Why do you ask?"

"Because we parted ways like that… Lana tried to do all that horrible stuff, but anyone…myself included, would be at a loss when faced with all those negative emotions. So, um, if you and Lana ended up fighting because of that…"

The clear turquoise eyes stared at Elea. Most of the people who knew the rumors of the omnipotent and invincible World Word imagined an extremely imposing and powerful figure.

However, the person Elea had met was just a normal young girl, much purer and more delicate than any of the powerful figures others had imagined.

"It's *my fault* the Lithia fire wasn't put out, so on the way home, I want to come back to Lithia…and have you two make up…"

"Well…"

It was an impossible request. With the morning sun, the poison should have long since suffused itself through her body.

"…Yes. I'd like to do that, too."

"Okay then, it's a promise."

The city of Lithia slowly faded into the distance. By their next visit, the territory would no longer be the New Principality. They'd never see the wyverns flying between the spires ever again, either.

"…And this time, I'll actually keep my promise. I won't use my power. But…I don't want to turn a blind eye to pain and suffering."

Your power is a gift to bring happiness to others.

"Make sure to teach me the right way to use it."

"…Of course."

Elea gently gripped the girl's outstretched pinkie. She felt the trust she had long since forgotten through the pressure of Kia's hand gripping her own.

"We're going to always be together, Kia."

The pair's travels would continue.

Facing terrible imminent danger but united through their bond.

◆

"Hey, Grave Keeper."

The day after the upheaval. Someone called out to the man working ceaselessly behind the New Principality's church.

His black vestments and large shield emblazoned with an angelic symbol were the dress of a paladin. In spite of this, his sullen expression and the aura surrounding him instilled an ominous feeling in the onlooker.

"Need some manpower?"

"Yeah, I'd appreciate the help. Just look at these guys."

An enormous number of caskets lined the edge of the graveyard, some even being piled on top of each other.

"That's all from the fire yesterday and the wyverns going out of control. Most of them were soldiers. Sad, really. Look. See, this young man had his wedding a mere two days ago. Right here at this church."

"……"

Kuze the Passing Disaster turned to the body and gave a silent prayer.

Taren the Punished had been slaughtered, and he had stopped the outbreak of war.

Kuze's achievements as an assassin earned high praise from Hidow the Clamp, and in addition to his compensation, he was given a firm promise that he would appear in the Imperial Competition to determine the True Hero. Kuze and Nastique quickly wiping out the entire leadership structure within Lithia was the sole reason the conflict had come to a premature end without spreading out any further.

—But in the process of infiltration, how much hostility had they had to bear, and how many lives had they taken? Before Kuze could be killed, those who bore such hostility toward him were killed first. Nastique's blade was automatic and merciless.

"Those…look to be Mage City soldiers, though."

"That's right. Once you're dead, there isn't any Lithia or Mage City anymore. Same with the wyverns. Up until yesterday, they were soldiers protecting our country. Truth is, I wanted to give them a proper burial, too, instead of burning them in the plaza like that."

"*Bweh-heh-heh*. I feel the same way… No one *deserves* to die."

"Absolutely right."

As he lowered the casket into the newly dug grave, the man muttered to himself.

“At times like these, the Word-Maker doesn’t save anyone, do they?”

“……”

The era of the True Demon King. When faced with the recurring scenes of tragedy, everyone had felt the same way. Even the people of the Order. Tragedies far worse and more extensive than the latest upheaval in Lithia had happened every year, every month, and almost every day.

Those able to only stand powerless in the face of such tragedies couldn’t help wanting to pin the responsibility on something else. The teachings of the Order, which existed precisely to save the people from such thoughts, were unable to compete with the severity of the tragedies the True Demon King had brought to the world.

The Word-Maker didn’t save anyone.

You’re exactly right.

The Order didn’t actually teach that some presence removed from mortal hands would save them. From the beginning, their teachings never preached of an omnipotent savior who would hear their prayers.

They taught there was a conscience within people’s hearts that drove them to help others and that innate goodness was itself the Word-Maker’s blessing to bring people salvation.

That’s why, by my own force of will, I need to save as many as I can…

He looked above the roof of the church that rose up behind him. There sat a pure-white young girl only Kuze could see, with eyes void of any thoughts or emotions gazing down on the silent dead.

…as best as I can.

Nastique the Quiet Singer—the angel’s figure had been visible to him since childhood, but her mind was inscrutable. The angel never once explained what she was thinking or why she continued to save a man like Kuze.

When he was young, he could hear the soft song she used to sing, but now she didn’t even hum a tune.

…Nevertheless, every once in a while, there came a time when he wished to believe the angel was speaking to him.

He could hear the words in his head—*Do you want to be saved?*

“What do I need to do…to save everyone?” he asked as he lowered a casket into its grave. The whisper was directed mainly to himself.

It was always on his mind. Though the power protecting Kuze was invincible, it could only kill other people.

Was a power solely for killing capable of truly saving people?

Were he still in the dark age of the True Demon King, then it might have been enough to save everyone.

But the True Demon King was dead, and peace had yet to return to the world. Killing Taren may have prevented a number of deaths, but bringing about an age of peace through the murder of another might actually be impossible.

“I’ve been a grave keeper for a great many years now. There were times I thought about that sorta stuff. Ultimately…a single person can only save what they can.”

“*Bweh-heh-heh*… That’s a good point. You’re exactly right.”

I want a Hero.

The True Demon King had been overthrown. It was, without a doubt, a great triumph that went beyond the realm of what the average person was capable. Someone, face and origin unknown, who had exorcised the age of fear that had continued relentlessly for twenty-five whole years, had existed somewhere in the world.

The True Hero might have been able to save everyone without spilling more blood and creating more tragedy in the process, like Kuze.

They might have been able to guide the dying Order on the correct path forward.

I want to hear their answer.

He needed to find the Hero.

Because Kuze the Passing Disaster was not a Hero himself but *someone who would compete to become the Hero*.

◆

Yuno the Distant Talon hadn’t accompanied Soujirou for long, but in that time, she had realized something about him.

He didn’t enjoy vehicles. He preferred his own two feet to a carriage when journeying between towns, and in order to go along with him, it meant that Yuno, too, would have to travel by foot.

“Soujirou. I know it’s weird to ask this now, but…”

Walking along the main road stretching out from Lithia, Yuno turned back.

“…Are you sure it was okay to choose me back there? The operation succeeded anyway, but…um, it might mean you won’t be a part of that Imperial Competition anymore…”

Soujirou’s orders from Hidow were to assassinate Taren the Punished. Despite not being pressed on the fact during their post-mission report, or perhaps precisely because of it, Yuno thought it was reason enough to believe that Soujirou would be at a disadvantage in the candidate screening process for the Imperial Competition.

“Pretty weird to ask me that now.”

“Right…I know, but.”

She knew worrying about it in the first place was a contradiction for her.

After all, Soujirou the Willow-Sword was one of her mortal enemies, present to see the fall of Nagan.

“Who cares? I had fun going at it with Dakai. I only do what I want to do, and I never regret a thing. I ain’t got any reason to listen to you comin’ at me and telling me what to do.”

“…Well, didn’t…Dakai the Magpie say something like that? About not caring at all what other people thought of him?”

Freedom meant not having your will influenced by others’ emotions. In which case, for the weak who needed to cooperate with one another to survive, and for Yuno, still bound by her thoughts of her past with Lucelles and Nagan, it meant she would never be truly free.

“I really can’t forgive you after all.”

“That so, huh? Still mad?”

Soujirou simply moved his snake eyes around in their sockets. On his shoulder sat the commonplace Nagan practice sword. The day Nagan went up in flames, it had been a terrifying and nigh-impossible prospect to refute the Visitor and his enormous power.

However, she thought she needed to talk to him. For Yuno to truly get her vengeance for that day, she needed to understand this enigmatic Visitor.

“I can’t stand that the bastards trying to change our world *don’t even bother looking at us*… I hate it…that our lives are treated like something worthless, like it doesn’t matter if we exist or not. I mean, look at yourself —”

Yuno knew. Soujirou believed in only one singular value, and it was a painfully obvious one.

“You’re only interested in finding someone to fight you, right?”

“……”

Powerful individuals like him, those who deviated far from the average person, were the only things that earned his acknowledgment. Yuno was certain these were the sole types of people with whom he could ever form a bond.

“There’s something wrong with that?”

“It’s not about…being wrong or right…but that’s why I can’t forgive you.”

Dakai and Soujirou’s particular breed of freedom could have been a wonderful thing. It could be that only jealous, average people didn’t want to recognize that. People whose lives were bound by the burdens of relationships and responsibility, unable to rebel against the laws of the world.

“The world isn’t so cheap and worthless.”

She’d realized it during their showdown with Dakai. The vengeance Yuno desired had to be entirely one-sided. As with meting out justice, unless she made the person responsible realize the value in what they had trampled over and forced them to repent, it was meaningless.

She wanted no one but the object of her vengeance to acknowledge the unerasable hatred she continued to bear, that it wasn’t misplaced or simply self-satisfaction.

“You might be right,” Soujirou idly murmured, looking up at the sun high in the sky.

“But I don’t get any of that stuff. Hell, I got kicked outta my last world. I don’t know a damn thing; I just got here. All I know is how to swing my sword and how to kill the people I end up fighting…”

“I said this when we first met, didn’t I?”

Yuno walked out in front of Soujirou. If he was choosing to travel by foot, she chose to do the same without any hesitation.

She thought she had to if she was going to carry out her vengeance.

“I’ll be your guide. Both for this world…and for the Aureatia Imperial Competition. So you need to teach me, too, Soujirou.”

“Teach ya what?”

“Um, well, let’s see…”

Yuno thought for a moment. Much like his lack of knowledge about their world, she wanted to learn about the parts of Soujirou she still knew nothing about.

“About where you came from…the Beyond.”

◆

With the war-torn night ending, Hidow the Clamp stood on the front lines of the postwar cleanup of the New Principality of Lithia. He figured even the “New Principality” moniker would stop being used in time. With the loss of the self-proclaimed Demon King Taren, the country of Lithia had fallen.

There, the young Aureatia civil servant found the person he was looking for in the middle of the city debris—a suspended jet-black tarantula and the exposed corpse of its headless pilot.

“…Dead, huh?”

Hidow took a seat beside the colossal corpse.

“Even seeing it with my own eyes, I can’t believe it. If you’re dead, then even I can’t grant that wish of yours, you know.”

An invincible mobile weapon to destroy the city and annihilate the enemy’s main force, the wyvern army. Hidow had wanted Nihilo the Vortical Stampede to play the role of decoy, drawing the strong champions of Lithia toward her while Soujirou and Kuze carried out their assassination plot.

“Sorry, Nihilo.”

The Twenty-Nine Officials of Aureatia, like all who stood atop the political mountain, always needed to keep the scales balanced, even if it meant avoiding Lithia civilians being wrapped up in Nihilo’s rampage was impossible or not knowing whether the young girl’s wish to become an ally to the minia was genuine.

At the point when the Cold Star was fired and war could no longer be avoided, Hidow had determined that releasing and disposing of her together with the rest of the New Principality of Lithia’s military power was the best possible outcome to ensure the smallest number of casualties.

“She wanted to be among the minia people again, huh…?”

Rising to his feet once more, he continued walking alone toward the city's outskirts.

He saw the sorrow of the people who had lost their homes or the military members of their families.

Though Hidow had been the one responsible for these tactics, he didn't have the luxury to agonize in guilt. It was his duty to make Lithia achieve an even greater future, rather than forcing them to pay for past transgressions.

…People suffered from tragedy because they didn't have the strength to face such horrors head-on. Nihilo had actively wished to discard that strength. She wanted nothing more than to be the same as the minia races she had once crushed underfoot.

"Being minia isn't really all that great anyway."

Coming to the outskirts, Hidow noticed the stone pavement at his feet had finally become sparse, with short blades of grass poking up from underneath.

Hidow had his offhand in his pocket. He needed to head toward an open area, away from the eyes of other soldiers and civilians…and as visible from the sky as possible.

"I knew you'd still be here."

His feet came to a halt. He didn't need to turn around to know the name of the person who'd landed behind him.

"…You're an Aureatia general, aren't you?"

The three-armed wyvern spoke in his usual gloomy tone.

"…A big shot, like Harghent."

"I'm a civil servant, not a general. This is what you came here for, isn't it, Star Runner?"

Hidow produced from his pocket an unaccounted-for apparatus, a crystal lens encased within it. The New Principality's ultimate magic item and their prided conflict-deciding weapon—the Cold Star.

"If you were still alive after that commotion, I knew you'd be after this thing. You're free to kill me and steal it, but how about we make a deal?"

"…I don't need it, really. The Cold Star wasn't what I was after."

Alus trained his musket. Hidow looked back at the wyvern for the first time and scowled.

"Well then, why did you follow me? If you were planning on killing me from the start, you could've shot me from overhead without flying all the way down here."

"…I know already. In Aureatia……you're having some big Imperial Competition……to decide…," the rogue declared dispassionately. "A match to decide the True Hero."

"That's right."

In the current age, with the True Demon King destroyed, they needed to decide on a Hero who could serve as a valiant symbol. Defeating the self-proclaimed Demon King attempting to become the world's sole authority, as

well as the selection of irregularly powerful fighters in the battle, like Kuze and Soujirou, was all part of this singular goal.

"…I'm taking part. I'll fight with Harghent."

"…Hmph. I'm shocked. I was just thinking about talking to you about it, myself."

Soujirou had shown his true abilities as an otherworld deviant, killing another Visitor like himself. Kuze had infiltrated the tightly guarded central stronghold and put an end to his target, Taren. They both possessed transcendent power, impressively demolishing all known battlefield wisdom and logic.

Nevertheless, Hidow recognized that the most fearsome presence within the battle was the one who had faced down an entire army by himself, *without even showcasing the full depths of his own power*—the wyvern rogue in front of him.

"You were so brazen and violent because you knew no one would be able to pick you out among the rest of the wyvern swarm, right? You calculated all that, managed to keep your trump card hidden, and worked to get the Twenty-Nine Officials of Aureatia to agree to nominate you—a very shrewd wyvern. That 'world's strongest rogue' reputation isn't just for show."

"……And your answer?"

Hidow cracked a smile.

"I'll be the one to support you."

The world's ultimate match to determine the one True Hero—dear readers, surely you are already aware…

"You'll be the first candidate."

…this was but one person's story.

CHAPTER 23 The Imperial Competition

One year earlier.

Slightly east from the palace. The central congress hall, built as a temporary government institution, stood out as newer than the other buildings in Aureatia. Those individuals who were formerly divided among the land's three kingdoms and fought against one another had now come together in this place and imposed their rule.

It was an obvious point, but getting this far had not been an easy process. It was the threat of the True Demon King, placed front and center, that had barely managed to convince the citizens to discard their nations and become a unified country.

The cities corroded by madness and terror were all abandoned one after another, until the minia races' living sphere had declined to less than a tenth of what it had once been.

However, as a result, Aureatia prospered like never before.

Separate cultures mixed together, and the enormous population coalesced in the few remaining cities.

The dark age left behind the sprouting bud of a new, unified nation.

Therefore, now more than ever, they had to search for the Hero.

The remaining deferment time was growing short. The thought ran through the mind of the Aureatia Third Minister, Jelki the Swift Ink, as he received the survey team's report.

"…That concludes our report. There is no one we can claim with one hundred percent certainty. We believe this time, too, the claimant assumed the title for self-promotion purposes."

"Understood. You may leave… The age of self-proclaimed Demon Kings has been replaced with self-proclaimed Heroes instead, it seems."

"…We'll continue our investigation."

Adjusting his sternly furrowed eyebrows, Jelki walked alone through the congress' corridor.

He was a dyed-in-the-wool civil servant, and on a list of the Twenty-Nine Officials' retainer military strength, you'd find his far closer to the bottom than the top. However, the intelligence officers in his employ remained the most skilled among the rest of the twenty-nine.

They had worked for nine small months and hadn't even confirmed the Hero's name. He understood there was an appropriate conclusion to reach. It was a natural result at which to arrive.

Nevertheless, it was a possibility the future of the world couldn't let pass.

Could the Hero have died without anyone knowing who they were?

Insanity. Maybe suicide. Considering the power of the True Demon King, even supposing the Hero did indeed kill them, it was extremely likely that the Hero had met such an end.

Nevertheless.

“You look as angry as ever. Everything all right?”

Just as he passed by the door, he heard a deep voice call to him. Jelki turned, still looking displeased, before considering things again and pressing his finger to his brow.

“…Oh, it’s you, Yuca. It’s always the same concern. As for my face, it’s no different than usual…”

“Guess that means you haven’t found the Hero, like always, eh? Want my advice?”

A giant man, rotund and chubby, dressed in red light armor and helmet. The Fourteenth General, Yuca the Halation Gaol.

His areas of responsibility as well as the nation he formerly belonged to were both different from Jelki’s, but he was recognized as one of the very few trustworthy men within the scheming maelstrom of the Twenty-Nine Officials.

“You don’t seem the type to handle this problem. Everyone has their strengths. Your jobs are… Wait, you were suppressing rebellious elements again, weren’t you? Is that what the armor’s for?”

“Well, yeah, that’s the gist of it. I killed two people. Doesn’t feel great, honestly. Our battle with the Demon King Army is finally over, but this time I had to kill fellow minia.”

“…The Demon King Army were all minia races, too.”

“Yeah… Well, I guess. It’s a figure of speech. Yeah. You get what I mean, right?”

In actuality, Yuca’s work did much to ease Jelki’s anxieties, with the general always taking the initiative on doing the dirty work of suppressing and purging dissent. At the very least, he was much more highly valued than the likes of the Sixth General Harghent, who even at times like these was toiling away with subjugating non-minia races.

This problem was about suitability for the job. Until the True Hero was found, they needed someone to buy time like this, to keep the tides from swelling higher.

“Yuca, about the Hero situation… Wait.”

When Jelki went to continue the conversation, he directed his attention to someone who’d appeared on the other side of the hallway.

“Third Minister?”

The approaching figure was a woman. Her clever and attractive features were plenty to court the average person’s favor.

“…Worrying yourself over the Hero thing again, are you?”

However, the wrinkles on Jelki’s brow only grew more intense. The woman’s name was Elea the Red Tag.

Like Third Minister Jelki, she was a civil servant, but he hated the Seventeenth Minister Elea from the bottom of his heart.

“This conversation has nothing to do with you. I heard a rumor that your soldiers were torturing Lithia troops the other day. What’s a woman like you —”

Jelki’s piercing gaze then shifted behind Elea.

A pair of red eyes shone among the deep shadows cast by the setting sun.

“—luring Her Majesty the Queen away for? Trying to fill her with nasty thoughts, no doubt.”

“…A very audacious implication to make, Minister. Her Grace requested that I accompany her on her stroll.”

“I see. I rescind the part about luring Her Majesty away, then.”

“…”

“Come on now, guys, no bickering in front of the queen. Isn’t that right, Your Majesty?”

Yuca locked eyes with the ruler and flashed a smile with his usual laid-back attitude.

The pair of red eyes blinked from their low stature before giving a single-word reply.

“Indeed.”

She was the last of the royalty.

Her long, soft silver hair and doll-like facial features made her seem like a single lovely flower, showcasing her superior pedigree from generations of royal blood.

The True Northern Kingdom. Their country’s royalty had stopped the True Demon King’s invasion for the first six years, but amid the rampantly spreading fear and sacrifice in the kingdom, the people’s madness, called “revolution,” led to their execution.

The Central Kingdom. Their country’s ruler, while afflicted with the same disease that had killed off their sons, gave their all to governing the people, establishing the foundation for the present-day Aureatia but passing away before they saw an end to the conflict.

The United Western Kingdom. Their country’s royalty sought an amicable agreement with the True Demon King, but for that reason, the True Demon King visited their capital, resulting in their slaughter along with their subjects’.

Within the turmoil of the United Western Kingdom massacre, there was a single surviving girl. The name of the world’s last remaining royal was Queen Sephite. A mere ten years old. Even at her young age, the shadow of death was always close behind.

The queen asked plainly—

“Jelki, is the Hero out there somewhere?”

“…They are, or so I hope.”

“In which case, why haven’t they made themselves known?”

“…There are still some reaches we haven’t searched yet. It’s possible the Hero isn’t necessarily a minia. We’ll scour the whole world if we have to.”

Whenever he spoke with her, Jelki lowered himself on one knee and looked her straight in the eyes. While the true governance had been transferred to a parliamentary system led by the Twenty-Nine Officials, Aureatia, composed of three kingdoms unified as one, was still a *monarchy*, and there was no higher authority than the lineage of the One True King chosen by the Word-Maker.

“What do you think, Elea?”

“…Whether or not there is indeed a Hero, we already have yourself, Queen Sephite. While you have yet to concern yourself with official business…I, Elea the Red Tag, can guarantee that Your Majesty will be able to one day rule over the people.”

That couldn’t come to pass.

Jelki was unable to deny that there were times when he, too, was surprised at Sephite’s percipient mind.

It was clear from her appearance and behavior that she possessed a capacity to lead the people.

However, if they were to someday hand over true authority to a young girl, the government was destined to become a puppet regime. Jelki looked to Elea, standing beside the queen—a woman of vulgar lineage, suspected of killing the previous Seventeenth Minister herself.

Sephite began to speak.

“Yuca. I want to hear your opinion, too.”

“Hmm. I don’t really understand it much myself. But having the Hero pop up couldn’t hurt, right?” Yuca said leisurely, scratching the back of his neck.

Jelki glimpsed from his kneeling position that, on Yuca’s sleeve, peeking out slightly from his armor, there was a stain of the blood spatter from the citizens he had cut down.

“If the Hero’s actually out there, then we owe them our lives after all.”

With her eyes still wide open, the queen tilted her head to the side slightly.

“In that case, let us find them. Bestowing royal honors and compensation should help, yes?”

“…We’ve done plenty to indicate that at this point, Your Majesty. Nevertheless, the True Hero has yet to appear.”

“Is the True Hero necessary?”

“…Hmm… And by that, you’re saying…?”

“Does it have to be the True Hero?”

“……”

This didn’t necessarily have to be the case, or at least, it shouldn’t have been.

If they were to prop up a false Hero, they could claim it was the Second General, Rosclay the Absolute, for instance, and the people would most likely be easily convinced.

However, if they were to one day find the True Hero? Should their existence be proven, Jelki couldn't possibly calculate how or in what way the resulting distrust would boil over and explode.

"Even after officially announcing the Hero, if the True Hero is already uninterested in claiming their title, then…I'm sure they won't stake a claim to the title even if we decide on one for ourselves."

Hearing the young queen's words, Elea quietly muttered.

"Making it widely known among the people that we're searching for the Hero…"

If instead of using spies to search far and wide, they instead prepared a bigger proclamation. If they could turn the affair into a colossal social event to capture the interest of the people, that would make it definitive and common knowledge, rendering meaningless anyone who appeared later to claim the title for themselves.

"*Ha-ha-ha.* Then in that case, you should round up all the self-proclaimed Heroes who Jelki's found and pit 'em together in a royal match or whatever. Hero'll be the strongest of them all, right?"

"…Yuca."

"Oh, sorry. Rude way of speaking in front of Her Majesty. My bad."

"……Forget it. Don't worry about it. I was thinking about something else."

This time Jelki glanced over once at the pretty Sephite.

Peering into her red irises made him feel like he was descending into a whirling abyss. Within the monarch's eyes still remained the vestiges of ruination, the only pair of eyes to have witnessed the fall of her kingdom and survive.

"Jelki?"

"…Oh, forgive me, Your Majesty, just something on my mind. Allow me to take my leave for now."

"Yes, of course. Be well, Jelki."

He couldn't reveal to anyone the plot that had just risen into his mind… not even the queen herself.

Jelki the Swift Ink's thoughts were already in motion. The remaining deferment time was growing short.

A Hero was needed for the new age. The symbol of authority who'd ended the age of the True Demon King, on par with royalty.

Then, with that Hero's authority, Sephite would be dethroned.

In this upcoming new age, the same monarchal government as before was unsustainable. Now, there existed no other besides Sephite who claimed lineage from the One True King, mandated by the Word-Maker. However, without the appearance of a new icon, in the Hero, the people

would eventually want for monarchal rule. Such a development would lead to a puppet regime, full of conspiracy and political rivalries.

The young queen would be unable to govern the unified kingdom, sowing division among the people, once united against the True Demon King threat, and conflicts would arise. Jelki thought that the Twenty-Third General who'd seceded from the assembly, Taren the Punished, had held the correct view on this subject.

…Someone. Someone needs to adopt this undertaking.

The current parliamentary government, managed by the Twenty-Nine Officials, was administered by politicians selected by the people. The Aureatia Twenty-Nine Officials, a wartime structure gathered together from throughout the three kingdoms, would be abolished, including Jelki himself.

Then Aureatia would become a republic, similar in structure to what a subsection of self-proclaimed Demon Kings had once created. If there was ever an age where such a thing was possible, it was the current one.

Too many people had died. Too much peace had been lost.

Jelki couldn't let the world slide back into an age of war and chaos ever again.

Someone needs to do it. Someone who has become aware of all this.

Self-proclaimed Heroes. If they were truly confident enough in their own strength to declare themselves Heroes, there would come a day when they became self-proclaimed Demon Kings and looked upon the unified nation with hatred. It was so in ages past, when all those with power inevitably proclaimed themselves one of the "demonic monarchs."

As long as a common enemy in the True Demon King existed, these powerful individuals hadn't posed a threat to the nation. However, the past twenty-five years had birthed too many of these sorts of champions in an attempt to defeat the True Demon King.

There needed to be only one Hero.

To begin the new age, all the others needed to be weeded out.

A pretext was needed.

The only one who can do that…

Adjusting his glasses on his brow, Jelki walked alone down the congress's corridor.

He now knew what he needed to do.

…is me. I need to find a way to do it.

There wouldn't be a seat left for Jelki in the time of peace he was looking to create.

He knew that better than anyone.

Then, one year later.

The enemy of all life, the True Demon King, who had plunged the world into chaos, had been defeated by…someone.

That individual's name and whether or not they truly existed was still a mystery.

Now, with the age of fear at an end, it had become necessary to determine who this Hero was.

Now, there were four Shura.

Soujirou the Willow-Sword.

Alus the Star Runner.

Kia the World Word.

Nastique the Quiet Singer.

Afterword

Thank you for reading. My name is Keiso. Though I am sure there are some who have picked this book up off the shelf and started reading from the afterword without actually buying my book, *Ishura*. For these individuals, I suppose I should greet you instead by saying, *I hope you'll enjoy my book*.

Therefore, I need to fill this afterword with the sort of helpful information that will not only entice potential readers to buy the book but encourage them to tell their friends and family about it as well.

Allow me to walk you through how to make a delicious carbonara.

Now then, what mental image do you have of carbonara? I imagine there are many of you out there who consider it a difficult and troublesome dish—some pasta tossed with powdered cheese, strangely difficult to properly heat for some reason, and then, what to do with the leftover cream in the fridge? It doesn't keep long, but maybe you could put it in your coffee…? I'm sure some of you out there know the piece of trivia that true Italian carbonara doesn't actually use cream in it at all.

I've been able to cook my usual carbonara recipe with a few more economical adjustments to the standard recipe. First, regarding the cheese, even a true citizen of Italy would be sure to include it without a doubt, so I think it's fine to have the cheese on hand. However, I recommend that instead of the powdered cheese you can buy in the supermarket, you buy between a pound to two pounds Parmigiano-Reggiano from an online store. While it commands a hefty price of around twenty dollars a pound, normal cylinders of powdered cheese are sold at around three dollars for a tenth of a pound, making them a whopping fifty dollars per pound. Cheese is a preserved food to begin with, so it will last for well over half a year if stored properly. Parmigiano-Reggiano is an extremely tasty cheese and can be used in many dishes outside of carbonara, so I would say this is a much better bargain.

Now, as for the bacon, the normal slabs or thick-cut packs of bacon you can find in the supermarket are just fine. There's no need to go out of your way to use difficult meats like pancetta or guanciale. They're expensive, too. I don't use any heavy cream, so this will save another three dollars or so.

The eggs can be your normal, everyday eggs.

Once you've got your ingredients together, start by boiling the pasta. A slightly gentle boil will match the carbonara best. On the other burner, line a frying pan with a slightly larger-than-normal amount of oil and fry up four to five slices of thick-cut bacon.

While prepping the pasta and bacon, grate about one to two tablespoons of the Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese and throw it in the bowl you plan to put the pasta. Next you crack the egg into the same bowl, but I think one yolk and half the white is the perfect amount here. When I crack the egg, I end up throwing away about half the white. It's a bit of a waste, so I ask you readers to think up another way to use the leftover egg white if you can. I imagine that the egg whites I've thrown away wish they could've been turned into a fancy macaron or something similar.

As your mind drifts to thoughts of macrons, it should be just about time for the bacon to turn a crispy golden brown. Make sure both sides are nice and crispy and wait until the pasta is done boiling.

Now, as for the level of heat, which society has recognized as one of the most important parts of making carbonara, in actuality, it's been proven that there is no need to worry about it at all. Transfer a single serving of the pasta over to the bowl with the grated cheese and egg, add the bacon (I've forgotten to add in the bacon I prepared before, but I digress), and if you mix them all together well, the remaining heat and moisture from the boiled pasta will turn it into a carbonara with the perfect level of heat and water content. Surprising, isn't it?

The result is that carbonara will have the pasta entirely coated in the egg's luster, and by having the cheese grated instead of powdered, it doesn't fully melt, leaving behind small chunks that add a welcome richness, resulting in a wonderful creamy flavor without the need for heavy cream.

Then, I season the fresh carbonara with as much coarsely ground pepper as I care to add and enjoy. Before I dig in, I offer my deepest gratitude to Kureta for their beautiful illustrations of all the numerous and multiracial characters I unreasonably forced on them; my editor Nagahori for their pinpoint advice regarding the expression and composition of my work, sharing as much passion as myself, if not more; and to all the readers supporting *Ishura*.

Now, while I may have finished eating the carbonara, we're not done yet. There should be a bit of the sauce left behind in your bowl after you're done eating. If you mix some tomatoes, cabbage, or bell peppers left in your fridge, you can use the sauce as a salad dressing and make a somewhat nutritionally balanced after-dinner salad, if you so choose.

However, I have yet to teach you the most wonderful part of this carbonara recipe. After you've finished eating, you're left with an extremely small number of plates and cooking utensils to wash afterward. If I eat everything straight from the bowl I used to make the sauce, I can get away with only washing this one dish. You can reuse both the frying pan you cooked the bacon in and the bacon grease for other dishes. The only other things that need washing are the knife, cutting board, and the pot you used to boil the pasta.

The book you've just read, *Ishura*, was written by myself as I replenished my energy with dishes like the carbonara described above. This is a story that features several different protagonists, all of them possessing brutal, peerless, and unbeatable superpowers and using them to mercilessly kill one another. In the next volume, many more Shura will make their appearance, and a tournament will begin in Aureatia, but it will still remain a story of the strongest versus the strongest, a killing melee where intrigue, superpowers, and everything else is fair game. I believe fifteen dollars is a fair price, so I hope you'll continue to pick up the next volume and beyond.

Incidentally, if you start using the carbonara recipe I've laid out in this afterword, between the eleven dollars saved per pound of cheese and the four dollars saved from leaving out the heavy cream, you'll save yourself fifteen in total. If you're wondering what to do with these fifteen dollars, well, I'm sure you astute readers who are reading this afterword in a bookstore somewhere know what to do.

Thus, if you would be kind enough to bring this book up to the register, then I will be able to avoid my previous "I hope you'll enjoy my book" equivocality and unreservedly thank you for reading this book. Thank you very much.

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